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MONTEZUMA, THE MERCILESS: or, THE EAGLE AND THE SERPENT.

A ROMANCE OF STRANGE MYSTERY.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "THE DARE DEVIL," "THE CRETAN ROVER," "THE PIRATE PRINCE," ETC., ETC.



"MONSIEUR, YOU ARE A COWARD TO STRIKE SUCH A CREATURE AS THAT."

A Sequel to "Merle, the Mutineer."

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Montezuma, the Merciless;

OR,

The Eagle and The Serpent.

A ROMANCE OF STRANGE MYSTERY.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "MERLE THE MUTINEER," "FRANCE-
LANCE, THE BUCCANEER," "THE FLYING
YANKEE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND.

A YEAR has gone by since my hero, in the foregoing romance of "Merle the Mutineer," left the yacht at Vera Cruz, and in that time changes have come to many who have figured in the pages of the story that precedes this one.

The gay city of New Orleans had made additions to its aristocratic society, in the person of Merton Ainslie, who had appeared like a meteor in the social firmament, and was said to be worth everything from one hundred thousand dollars to a million; then came Mr. Rosal Abercrombie, wife, and young son, who lived in elegant style in the most fashionable part of the city; after these were Captain Arthur Grenville, wife, and baby boy. The latter family were also classed among the wealthy nabobs, and their house was the resort of the ultra fashionables, for Mrs. Grenville had a way of drawing around her the *creme de la creme* of the elite.

The grand old house on *Rue St. Louis*, still held as its occupant Mildred Monteith, the reigning belle and acknowledged "best match" in the city of New Orleans, ever noted for its beautiful heiresses.

She seemed a shadow graver in manner than of yore, and yet her eyes sparkled as brightly, and her brilliant beauty and wit were the admiration of her friends.

Shortly after the disappearance of Merle, Mildred's old guardian had been called to that "far country from whose bourn no traveler returns," and the maiden held her fortune and herself in her own hands.

Suitors she had by the four-score-and-ten; but two were more urgent than others in their attentions, and seemingly more sincere in their devotion.

These two were Merton Ainslie, the new society meteor, who hovered around the maiden, as a moth around a candle, willing to singe his wings, figuratively speaking, his hopes in reality, if he could but be near the flame.

The other was Captain Wilber Sebastian, or rather ex-captain, for after a few months' cruise in his sloop-of-war, he had resigned his commission, and, returning to New Orleans, had settled down to a siege of Mildred's heart, in which his strongest ally was his sister Estelle.

Wilber Sebastian had sold Darrington Lodge for a good round sum in cash, to some exiled French nobleman, throwing in the bones of his kindred—that is, the family burying-ground, which is found upon nearly all large plantations in the Gulf States.

The money derived from the sale, with other cash accumulations, Sebastian had put into the banking business, forming a copartnership with Rosal Abercrombie under the name of

"ABERCROMBIE & SEBASTIAN,
"Bankers & Brokers."

It was not long before this financial venture proved a success, and the two bankers saw gold-mines ahead of them, and Wilber Sebastian felt, when the master of the Monteith estates, he would be a prince among men, as far as money went.

And he had strong hopes of this same estate falling into his hands, for, since Merle had, by his acquiescence in the charges made against him, by silence, and rushing to the bad as an outlaw, proved his guilt, Mildred had seemed to look upon Captain Sebastian with the kindness she held for him before that scene on the water, when all would have been lost had it not been for the man then branded as pirate, and against whom wild stories were told, for rumors floated around how a daring buccaneer was cruising the seas in his fleet schooner, spreading devastation and death, and though some said it was Ricardo, Lafitte's old lieutenant, others were wont to say that they knew that it was Merle, the Mutineer, while a few went so far as to state that they themselves had seen him upon the buccaneer craft, when vessels upon which they were had been boarded and robbed.

But there was another lover of Mildred's who believed she had given him cause to hope, and this was Merton Ainslie, who certainly was on most friendly terms at the Monteith mansion, and treated with marked kindness by its mistress. Did she love him, or did the secret he held regarding Merle cause her to receive him with friendship?

Some said she loved Wilber Sebastian; others, that Merton Ainslie was her favorite; which was the favored one let the sequel show.

And poor Fidele?

Alas! the shadow of death had crossed the threshold of the little cottage, and Mrs. Chandelieur had been borne from the rooftop to the cemetery, leaving her children to bitterly mourn her loss.

With success and hope Louis Chandelieur had returned from his South American cruise, to find his mother buried, and his sister and the two old servants alone the occupants of the cottage.

"And Merti! where is he, Fidele?"

A burst of tears was the answer; he had not been near her for months; yes, he had attended the funeral, asked if he could serve her, and there it had ended.

"Have you offended him, sis, in any way?"

"No, Louis."

"Strange! it is not like Merti; I must see him, for I don't like the color going from your face."

And Louis Chandelieur did see Merton Ainslie, and the result was, that young gentleman went home with him to dinner, and the smiles came back to Fidele's face, and her cheeks grew rosy once more, for "business" had been his excuse for not showing his elegant self at the humble, but pretty cottage, in the days that had gone by.

A month the brigantine Fidele lay in port, and then set sail for the China Seas, and she for whom the graceful vessel was named went down to bid her brother a long farewell, knowing it would be many, many months ere he again dropped anchor in the Mississippi.

But her escort was Merton Ainslie, and he spent the evening at the cottage, and poor Fidele smiled through her tears, for many sweet things said Merton Ainslie to her, which almost made her forget her grief at parting with her brother.

But after that night the days went by and he came not again; he had tired of his toy, or feared some of his visits to the cottage might reach the Monteith mansion.

Fidele, in her love and faith, wrote to him to come; but no answers came, and gradually it forced itself upon her mind that she was deserted.

"Oh, God! what am I to do? I loved him more than all else in the world, and he is untrue to his vows to me—alas, poor me!"

"The world has no joy for me now; Louis is far away, and what can I do? what can I do?"

"Ah! the world can be forgotten there! Yes, I will go and see the good Sisters of the Convent of Sainte Ursula, and there I can find rest—rest!"

"Mother, my poor mother! Why was I not taken instead of you?"

A few moments more did Fidele give way to an abandon of sorrow; then she sprung to her feet, repeating the lines, so true, and yet so sad that they are true:

"Woman's love will too often, like the ivy, cling
Around a base and worthless thing."

Then the grief was swept from her beautiful face, and in its place rested firm resolve.

Ten days after Merton Ainslie drove by the cottage, and he saw the front door and windows closed.

"What does that mean, Gabriel?" he asked, with a pang of self-reproach, as he beheld the old negro coming out of the gate.

"It mean Missy Fidele done gone away, Marsa Merton," sadly answered the old man.

"Gone! and where?"

"She gone to de convent, sah; has tooked de wail, where she will be free from de debbil and de flesh o' dis life, sah."

Merton Ainslie turned deadly pale; but he said, calmly:

"And you are here alone, Gabriel?"

"Me an Jemima, sah, de ole woman; den dere's de Bossy, an' Bluker, an' de chickens, as Missy Fidele leff us to care for until Massa Lou come back, an' she leff us money in de bank for our dispenses, and we draws it like white folks ebbery month, sah."

"If you need anything more, Gabriel, come to see me; good-by," and Merton Ainslie drove rapidly away, muttering:

"She's a greater fool than I believed her. Well, I am rid of her, and all is plain sailing now—no breakers ahead, and a clear wake astern."

And so it seemed to Merton Ainslie the night when the anniversary of his fall from grace rolled round to one year.

As he paced to and fro in his elegant rooms, after a sumptuous dinner, awaiting the hour when he should call upon Mildred Monteith, he looked little like a man who carried a skeleton in his heart.

Around him was every luxury that heart could wish; his home was elegant, his blooded horses numerous, his cellar filled with choice wines, and his tables heavily weighted down with silver plate.

His servants were well trained, and life seemed like a happy dream, for no care rested on his brow.

In the bank he yet had a few thousands of the

inheritance from his uncle, and there had been no occasion for him to touch the jewels—they yet remained intact.

But in his room he was often wont to go to his desk, touch a secret spring that opened a drawer, and take out those rare treasures—the diamond necklace—the ruby anchor, and the gem-studded dirk.

As he thus waited until the hour of his visit, he again went to his desk and dragged forth his treasures.

Presently a youth entered noiselessly, as he was communing as was his wont, half aloud, and threw himself down upon the rug before the mantle.

Merton Ainslie saw him, yet took no notice of his presence; he trusted the boy implicitly, though he had taken him five months before without references.

There was something in the handsome face of the boy that showed he could be trusted, and, flattering himself upon his power of reading human nature at a glance, Merton Ainslie, when the youth came to him and asked him for a place in his bachelor home, had taken him at once, and soon found him invaluable; in fact he made him his companion rather than servant.

He was a handsome boy, apparently about seventeen, with a dark face, black hair, and large dark eyes that were very expressive; a slight mustache shaded his lip, and his short locks curled all over his head.

His form was slight, yet he was strong and active, and seemed capable of any work that he was bidden to do.

With a glance at the boy, Merton Ainslie began to pace to and fro—his treasures spread out upon the little desk.

"Well, the year is up, and I will hesitate no longer," he muttered.

"The time allotted for a widow to mourn her husband is a twelvemonth, and she should be content now to let the dead past bury its dead."

"Yes, to-night must decide my destiny; to-night must say if my sin will reap reward."

"I madly love the woman, and I will have her by fair means or foul. Curse Wilber Sebastian! He runs me neck and neck in the race, and I know it is his intention to offer himself to-night, for Lucien Bethune told me so to-day; but he has to take his sister to the opera first, and I'll get in ahead—I hope, hold the lead, too."

"By heaven! I must hold it now, for I have sinned for her, and mine she must be."

"If I win her, I'll keep these treasures intact, and give them all to her; then my conscience will be at rest on that score, for she will get what is really her own; but the secret that goes with them must be kept ever in my heart—Ha! there is the bell. Run, Hope, and say I am out, for it is doubtless some fellow just dropped in to drink my wines and smoke my cigars. What is it, Hope?"

"A note, sir?" and the lad handed his master a small missive.

He tore it open and read the line written on the paper:

"Come to me—I am dying. FIDELE."

"Curses on the luck! who brought this, Hope?"

"A boy, sir."

"Good! boys always idle in carrying a message. Mind you, this did not come until after I had gone out."

"Yes, sir."

"By the Star of Bethlehem! Hope, you lazy rascal, why didn't you tell me it was eight o'clock?"

So saying, Merton Ainslie rushed from his room out into the hall, threw on his hat, and springing into his carriage, was driven rapidly away.

At midnight he returned, and it was evident that he had stopped for supper at the *Cafe Saint Louis*, and drank heavily.

"Hope, you young scape-grace, where are you?" he cried, gayly, as he entered the room, his night-key having let him into the house.

"I am here, Merton Ainslie! here, face to face with you!"

The voice was stern and threatening, as the youth sprung forward, and the man started back; but too late—too late!

There was a gleam in the light from the chandeliers, as the youth's arm was raised and brought down with terrible force and wonderful quickness, and a cry broke from the lips of the man, who reeled and fell into the arms of the one who had driven a knife into his heart.

"Ah, Merton Ainslie, thy day of retribution came in the morning of thy life! See, ere your eyes are blind in death, see who I am, or if you have no sight, hear!"

The youth bent close to his ear and breathed some name—a name that brought a groan of anguish from the lips of Merton Ainslie, and with that moan of agony, wrung from the heart, his lamp of life went out forever.

"Dead! yes, he is dead! now to fly," and the youth darted to the desk, upon which still lay the necklace and anchor, where Merton Ainslie had left them in his hasty departure; the jeweled dirk the youth held in his clenched

band, and it was its keen blade that had pierced the heart of the form then lying prone upon the floor.

Wiping the blade upon the rich window drape, the youth returned it to the scabbard, and placed the three treasures securely away in his bosom.

Then he seized from a chair a small valise, and with a cry, of mingled fright and remorse, fled from the house into the deserted streets, leaving behind him the victim of the jewel-hilted dirk.

The opal had brought death to Merton Ainslie.

He had sown the wind and reaped the whirlwind.

CHAPTER II.

HUSH MONEY.

WHILE Merton Ainslie lay upon the carpet of his floor, the blood slowly oozing from the deep wound in his breast, Wilber Sebastian was pacing to and fro, the full length of his large chamber in the *Hotel Saint Louis*.

"Well, I laid my heart at her feet to-night, and if that accursed Ainslie had not come in as he did— If I had him on shipboard I would maroon him so that he never would cross my path again.

"Well, to-morrow I know my destiny—ay, to-day, for the midnight hour has passed; yes, she said she would give me my answer to-day, and it must be yea; for I have struggled hard and sinned much to win the haughty beauty.

"Yet, I do not like the way that Ainslie looked when he came in the *cafe* to-night; it was altogether too joyous an expression he wore to suit me; his joy might prove my sorrow.

"Well, I'll to bed, and bide the alternative."

And Mildred Monteith—what of her? She had calmly listened to the avowal of love from the lips of Wilber Sebastian, a story he had often told her before, but not for the year past, for, with assumed delicacy he had curbed his impatience until Merle should have been forgotten.

He had begged his sister to excuse him as an escort to the opera, secured her a substitute, for Captain Grenville was away, and had gone to see Mildred ere the stream of visitors began to flock in, for the parlors were nightly thronged with admirers of the beauty and heiress.

He had found her alone, and in impassioned words told of his love, that had grown with years, since she was a mere child, and increased as her wealth and beauty had; but the latter circumstance he wisely kept to himself.

Mildred looked kindly upon him, and there was a tender glance in her expressive eyes; but, ere she could reply, and while he still knelt before her in his most graceful attitude, there was a step in the hall.

"I will answer you to-morrow, Captain Sebastian," she had quietly said, and then arose to greet Merton Ainslie.

"Blast that fellow! He's cut in ahead of me," was what Merton Ainslie thought, as he entered the room.

"Curses upon that bore! he has ruined all," was the thought of Wilber Sebastian.

Their words were far different.

"Sebastian, my dear fellow, I am glad to see you."

"Thanks, old fellow; came near dropping in to dine with you to-day; wish I had now."

"So do I, as our destination for the evening was the same."

Wilber Sebastian left early, pleading an engagement, and Mildred heard again the "old, old story."

But, inopportune visitors seemed the order of that evening, and Lucien Bethune and Otis Alden dropping in, Merton Ainslie was put off until the morrow for the answer he so longed for, yet hoped and dreaded to hear.

Consigning the lieutenant and the doctor to the bottomless pit, Merton Ainslie soon left and played a game of *roulette*, in a fashionable Gambling Hall, to see how his luck went.

He won heavily, and with no foreboding of evil left the place and wended his way to the *Cafe Saint Louis*, where he passed an hour in drinking, to then go home to his death; his *maranatha* had come all too soon.

And she who had received these avowals of undying affection, wore no smile of joy as she went to her room that night.

The lips that she had longed to hear tell their love for her were far away; he whom she had loved with all the intensity of her nature was an outlaw.

"Well, I suppose I must marry, one of these days, though I have no love to give him who will be my husband. Estelle urges it, and so does Arthur; but they both wish me to marry Wilber Sebastian.

"He is a better man than I thought him, and he has been as kind as a brother could be to me, yet I do not love him. Had I never met Merle—Oh, God! why did his name pass my lips?

"Well, Wilber Sebastian weighs equally in the balance with Merton Ainslie. Sebastian was his enemy, I will always feel, no matter what his crimes were; and Ainslie was his

friend, and—and—but must I allow the love I held for an outlaw to decide me in my choice of a husband?

"Both men are gay, I know; but then, all men live a lie, it seems. Ainslie is rich, very rich, 'tis said, and cannot have his eye upon my fortune; besides, when he was poor he worked hard.

"Sebastian is doubtless well off; but he is a banker, and they are but legalized gamblers, and my fortune might be swept away in one speculation.

"Silly girl I am; I love no man; must marry somebody; have a number of fine offers—two better than the others, and will decide it by a game of chance to-morrow; let me see, I will take the dice of my backgammon-board, throw them twice, first for Sebastian, second for Ainslie, and the one getting the larger number wins Mildred Monteith and her fortune, but not her love."

The maiden whom the world said was happy, with a shudder rung her bell for Louise, and crept into her downy bed, a great dull pain at her heart.

"The lip may wear a careless smile,
The words may breathe the very soul of light-
ness;

But the hurt heart must deeply feel the while
That life hath lost, forever lost its brightness."

Thus was it with Mildred Monteith; she had buried her love, and her love was her life, in the grave with the honor of the one whom she had idolized, and whom the world said was an outlaw.

"Oh, Miss Mildred!"

The maiden had been awake until the "wee sma' hours," thinking, and she wearily unclosed her eyes as her maid, Louise, stood by her bedside.

"Well?"

"Mr. Ainslie has been murdered!"

"Murdered! Merton Ainslie murdered?" and with white face Mildred sat up in bed.

"Yes, miss; he was found by his butler this morning, lying dead in his room, a deep knife-thrust in his side. He had evidently just come home when he was killed, for he had his hat and gloves on.

"Nothing has been stolen, and his boy, Hope, is missing, and some say he killed him, but no one knows."

Mildred made no reply, but sunk back upon her pillows.

"Are you going to get up, Miss Mildred?"

"What time is it, Louise?"

"Nine o'clock, miss."

"Then come back at eleven."

The maid left the room, and Mildred murmured:

"There is no choice now; Fate says I am to be Mrs. Wilber Sebastian. Poor Merton Ainslie! Who can have been his foe?"

That evening Wilber Sebastian called, and the story of the murder was discussed, the young banker, by a great effort only, disguising his joy at the fate of his rival.

But he said, sadly:

"Poor Ainslie! a splendid fellow, though a trifle wild.

"But the strangest thing is, nothing was missing from his house, and his watch and pocket-book, with a roll of bills just won at *roulette*, were not disturbed, so that robbery was not the reason for the murder."

"The youth, Hope I believe he was called, has not been found?" asked Mildred.

"No, he is suspected, but he seemed devoted to Ainslie, and some say, as nothing is known of the boy, that he was kidnapped, and Merton was killed in defending him; but the strangest of all is, that Ainslie is not rich, for, excepting his house, and furniture, his horses and carriages, he has but four thousand in bank.

"If he has more no one knows of what it consists, and he was believed to have been worth half a million; what he leaves a distant relative will inherit.

"Can I call for you, Miss Mildred, to attend the funeral?"

"Yes, I will go with you."

That night Mildred Monteith laid her head upon her pillow, the promised wife of Wilber Sebastian.

Six months after she became his wife, and the men envied the groom—the women envied the bride.

The world did not see the grave of a lost love in her heart, any more than it saw the dark secret in the heart of Wilber Sebastian.

The day after the honeymoon was ended Wilber Sebastian received half-a-dozen "callers" in his private office.

They came on "business," they said, and he felt that they spoke the truth.

Two of them came together—ex-Lieutenant Otis Alden, and ex-Surgeon Lucien Bethune, formerly of the navy; the one a "young man 'bout town," living 'twas said, on his "prize money," received when in service; the other a practitioner of medicine, so his sign read.

Both of these stranded officers were "ground swells," whose tongues had an unpleasant way of slipping the cable, if not anchored down with gold.

They left the private office with a check each

—on a Northern bank—for ten thousand dollars.

The boatswain and several seamen, the marines, and the cook of the *Sea Serpent* schooner followed after, and went out smiling, with gold for ballast.

Then Wilber Sebastian wrote checks to others of his crew who had "sworn falsely," and these were mailed to their addresses.

"There, that is done! a cursed unpleasant duty, and I am glad it is over with."

Poor fool! when a man pays "hush money" his troubles have just begun!

These "business" transactions made a large hole in Wilber Sebastian's private bank account; but then, as the husband of the heiress of the Monteiths, his credit was "gilt edge" on 'change.

CHAPTER III.

FIDELE'S FATE.

A YEAR passed away—a year a wife had Mildred been.

Her face was just as beautiful, with a shadow upon it in repose, it might be, but ever bright when before the gaze of others.

If Wilber Sebastian had ruled on shipboard, he found that he could not govern his own way in the home circle, and his cowardly nature was soon under the control of his haughty wife.

Her property he had in full control; with business she would not trouble herself, but he soon found that he had married a golden idol to worship, not one to return his love.

He had remonstrated at her coldness toward him, and she had smilingly answered:

"I told you I did not love you; that I married you because it was fashionable to marry."

"You have all my wealth in your keeping—I am your wife now, Wilber, dear, what more do you want?"

"Some show of affection; you are made of marble, Mildred."

"No, iron say, for marble is too easily broken; but I am no silly sentimental school-girl, to be dying with love. Don't be foolish, Wilber."

This was their wedded life when not before the world's eye.

A year a wife, and Mildred sat alone in her room.

"And this is married life? Would to Heaven I had remained as I was and died an old maid."

"Mildred Monteith would have looked better on my tombstone than Mildred, relict of Captain Wilber Sebastian."

"How little do we know the mysteries and miseries that tombstones hide! What is it, Louise?"

"A card for you, miss," and the pretty quadroon placed a piece of pasteboard in Mildred's hand.

"Louis Chandeaur! where have I met him, or heard his name?" she said, musingly, glancing at the card.

"Ah! I have heard poor Ainslie speak of him. I will come right down, Louise."

Ten minutes after she swept into the parlor—the same in which nearly three years before Merton Ainslie had sat, and sworn to win the fair young mistress of Monteith mansion—swept into the parlor looking like a princess.

Louis Chandeaur arose to greet her—Louis Chandeaur, well-dressed, bronzed-faced, but a gentleman, yet his eyes were deep-set and he had a sad, haggard look.

"Mrs. Sebastian, I believe."

"Yes, sir; do I not recall in you a friend of Mr. Ainslie?" she said, pleasantly.

"Mrs. Sebastian, it is of Merton Ainslie that I would speak to you."

"His was a sad fate, poor fellow."

"Mrs. Sebastian, his fate was a sad one; yet, and one says it whom he ever befriended, who ever loved him as a brother—a sad fate, yet a deserved one!"

"Mr. Chandeaur, you do not seem to be a man to make an idle assertion—why have you come to speak to me against Merton Ainslie?" said Mildred, with some show of anger.

"I have come, madame, to tell you the truth—I have come with a great sorrow in my heart to tell you of Merton Ainslie!" returned Louis, earnestly.

"If I can confer a favor by listening, Mr. Chandeaur, I will do so; but Mr. Ainslie was nothing to me," replied Mildred, indifferently.

"You mistake, Mrs. Sebastian, pardon me for saying so. I come to you with no idle tale of my grief, or to traduce one to whom I owe more than to any other man."

"I come to you, madame, to tell you that Merton Ainslie's life was a lie, and that you were his intended victim."

"It is a mystery as to who was his murderer, but I know, and I desire that you listen to what I have to say, for it deeply concerns you, Mrs. Sebastian."

Mildred saw that Louis Chandeaur was in deadly earnest, and she signified her consent to hear what he had to tell, her face slightly changing color when he told her he knew who had taken the life of Merton Ainslie.

"Mrs. Sebastian, I was born a gentleman, as you know when I tell you that my grandfather was Pierre Chandeaur; but we were not left

rich, my mother, my sister and myself, as my father gambled away his inheritance.

"Hence I sought to support my mother and sister, and entered the navy as a midshipman when I was but thirteen, and Merton Ainslie was my boon companion, for we went together to Algiers, serving on the same vessel, and together we were dismissed the service, five years ago, for a wild frolic ashore.

"I went at once to the dogs, so to speak, while Ainslie, with more manliness, went to work.

"I became a reckless vagabond, and he an honest clerk, though he had none to care for him, and I had a mother and sister.

"One night my tide changed, thanks to Merton Ainslie; he was in command of Captain Grenville's yacht, and one, whom I believed to be an old man, came on board, and the result was I was made second officer, and sailed in the yacht to Vera Cruz."

Mildred started; what was coming next?

"We were in Vera Cruz some ten days, and then returned to New Orleans, without the one who had employed us, and whom I had never seen after arriving at the Mexican port.

"Ainslie told me he had taken the yellow fever and died in Vera Cruz, and he was told to return with the yacht, our employer leaving the crew treble wages, and Merton and myself a thousand dollars each."

Mildred grew paler, her heart almost stood still.

"Of course I believed Merton—I had no reason for doubting him.

"We returned the yacht to Captain Grenville, and then I received my thousand dollars, and more, for Ainslie had just inherited fifty thousand dollars in money—"

"Fifty thousand, did you say, sir?" asked Mildred, remembering that Merton Ainslie had told her his inheritance was half a million.

"Yes, madame, that was the sum he inherited, and out of that he raised me from poverty to independence by giving me a vessel for my own, and demanding from me a promise never to be again a drunkard or a gambler. I have kept that pledge, and more, I have been successful, and can return to Mr. Ainslie's heir the sum which he gave me.

"When Merton Ainslie was a poor man, Mrs. Sebastian, he was engaged to my sister, and I looked forward to the day when she would become his wife; but he broke with her; that is, cruelly deserted her, and became your lover, madame.

"I sailed for the China seas, my mother had died, and poor Fidele, my sister, whose whole heart was wrapped up in her false lover, at first sought to enter the *Convent des Ursulines*; but she was a Creole,* and had warm blood in her veins—blood that was revengeful, and never forgave an injury.

"Hence, my dear madam, instead of leading the life of a nun, she entered upon a far different career, disguising herself as a boy, dyeing her light complexion brown, and her golden hair black, while she shaded her lip with a slight mustache.

"This completely metamorphosed Fidele into a boy of seventeen, and she obtained employment with Merton Ainslie."

"*Mon Dieu!* she was the supposed youth, Hope!" cried Mildred, now most deeply interested.

"She was, Mrs. Sebastian, and in the capacity of body-servant and confidential friend to Merton Ainslie, she learned the secret of his life, for he had a bad habit of musing half aloud, and an equally disagreeable one of talking in his sleep, when he threw himself on a lounge for an afternoon nap.

"Thus it was that my sister Fidele heard the secret of Merton Ainslie from his own betraying lips—heard how the one whom I had supposed was an old man was none other than Merle, the Mutineer!"

Mildred started, and her face flushed and paled alternately; but Louis Chandeaur continued:

"I know, Mrs. Sebastian, that you were one time engaged to Mr. Merle Grenville, and I know that he was cast off by every one when he was said to be a buccaneer; but I do not believe he is now a pirate—I believe him dead."

"Oh God, I thank Thee!" groaned Mildred.

"He went to Vera Cruz to fight a duel, and he told all to Merton Ainslie, telling him to wait one week for him, and if he did not return to the yacht, to sail to New Orleans, for he would be dead.

"Ainslie waited ten days, and then we weighed anchor; but it seems that Mr. Grenville had left some instructions with the man he trusted—some papers that would have cleared him of the charges against him, and these, with a letter, were addressed to you."

"To me? You astound me, Mr. Chandeaur!"

"I tell you the truth, Mrs. Sebastian; they were addressed to you, and would have been delivered in safety, had not a terrible temptation been left with them."

"I do not understand, sir," said Mildred, now deeply moved, in spite of her wonderful self-control.

"I will explain: Mr. Grenville was the possessor of a valuable diamond necklace, a ruby anchor, and a gem-studded dirk, each of them worth a fortune; also a ring of rare beauty and great value, which I now see upon your finger.

"These were left by the father of Mr. Grenville to him, and that father was Freelance the buccaneer, who, in some way, had obtained these treasures.

"It was these, Mrs. Sebastian, that made a villain of Merton Ainslie. He was poor; he did not then know of the death of his uncle and his inheritance, and he destroyed the papers sent to you, appropriated the valuables, except the ring which you wear, and which he gave you with a forged letter, pretending it to have been written by Mr. Grenville. These will prove the forgery," and Louis Chandeaur handed to Mildred half a dozen sheets of paper, upon which were parts of the letter Ainslie had shown her as coming from Merle.

"I am listening, sir," she calmly said, though trembling like a leaf.

"Upon his return to New Orleans Merton Ainslie began his plot which was to make you his wife."

"I was a victim, too, of his treachery?"

"Yes, madame; your beauty and wealth made a villain of him, and he entered upon his plot, his inheritance giving him money without having to dispose of the jewels which he kept, concealed in a secret drawer in his desk.

"At length he asked you to become his wife, and that night he was slain—slain by the hand of my sister Fidele, and with the anchor-hilted dirk he had stolen from you, for the treasures were sent to you, with the papers, by Mr. Grenville.

"By snatches of communing with himself, by his mumbling in his sleep, those forged papers in his desk, and those treasures, Fidele learned how great a crime Merton Ainslie had committed, against Mr. Grenville, against you, and toward her, his betrothed wife. In her hatred for one whom she had loved, in her jealous rage at believing he was to marry you, she drove that jewel-hilted dagger into his false heart."

"A fearful retribution for his treachery."

"A just one, Mrs. Sebastian. Allow me to give to you the treasures sent you by Mr. Grenville, and would to God I could give you the papers, which Merton Ainslie threw into the sea."

He took from an inner pocket the precious relics and handed them to Mildred.

She took them quietly, and gazed upon them, shuddering as she touched the dirk.

"They are very beautiful and rare, and of immense value; the ring I wear I have often seen on Mr. Grenville's finger, and the necklace and anchor he wore the night of the carnival ball—the night he sailed for Vera Cruz, and the last time I saw him.

"The dirk I never saw before. God pity me, if I have wronged you, Merle."

She spoke more to herself than to Louis; but he replied, earnestly:

"Pardon me, Mrs. Sebastian, but I have always believed Mr. Grenville far more sinned against than sinning, when charged as a mutineer—I—I—am a blunt—man, madame, and speak out what I think; but I sailed with Captain Sebastian, and he was a hard officer."

Mildred flushed and said quickly:

"Am I to keep these?"

"Yes; they were sent to you by one whose intention, I now am confident, it was to return and clear himself before the eyes of the world of the brand upon him. By a strange circumstance, Mrs. Sebastian, one of my crew, home from England, from whence I have just come, was one of the mutineers. He died on the passage over, and his story was a strange one:—he said Mr. Grenville was not guilty of mutiny, and—but I will not say more, for my red-hot shots may find their way into a powder-magazine; but, one of these days, this mutinous affair, I think, will have a different phase put upon it. Those valuables are yours, madame; I have but done my duty in giving them to you."

"I thank you, sir," said Mildred, dreamily. "And your sister, Mr. Chandeaur—what of her?"

"She is at rest, Mrs. Sebastian; she sleeps at the bottom of the sea," he said, with intense sadness. "She fled from this city on the night of her fearful act, and sought me, knowing the ports at which I was to touch. She found me in Liverpool, and came aboard my vessel, a wreck of her former self.

"Poor girl, she never rallied, with all I did for her, and died on the passage home, after confessing all to me, and placing those valuables in my hands, receiving from me the pledge that I would give them to you alone. I have fulfilled my pledge, Mrs. Sebastian, to my dying sister, and now will bid you good-morning."

"One moment, Mr. Chandeaur, or rather Captain Chandeaur, for such I know is your title—do you not think that the—death of Merton Ainslie, that is, as to who took his life, had better remain a dead secret?"

"Mrs. Sebastian, from my heart I thank you; it is most womanly in you to think of poor Fidele.

"Yes, let her memory not be stained before the world. Those treasures were never seen by any one excepting Fidele, while in the possession of Merton Ainslie; you know best how to account for them to Captain Sebastian."

Mildred's eyes flashed at her husband's name; but she remained calm; there was a terrible revulsion in her mind, caused by all she had heard.

As Louis Chandeaur departed, her thoughts gave vent to words:

"Merle, before God, I believe you innocent, whether you lie in your grave or live.

"And Wilber Sebastian, I believe you guilty! That mystery is not yet solved—it may never be; but, I am your wife, husband mine, only before the world's eye, from now henceforth; my fortune you have; but Mildred Sebastian is her own mistress."

The flash of her eyes, and the resolution in every feature, proved that she would keep her word.

CHAPTER IV.

MERLE RECEIVES A VISITOR.

THE reader, I know will forgive me, for casting a retrospective glance back of the incidents related in the last few chapters, when it is to make known to them why it was that Merle did not return on board the yacht, after leaving it at Vera Cruz.

The reader is already aware that, upon his arrival at the hotel, and registering as Don Merlino, from Corpus Christi, he sent word to Vistal Guarena of his return to Vera Cruz, to meet him in the *duello*.

But it so happened that the influence of Don Felipe Cosala, the Monte Prince, had gained for his son the promotion promised, and command of the Castle San Juan de Uloa, and Colonel Ruidrez being ordered to another fort, he was to leave his beautiful daughter behind him as the wife of Vistal Guarena, now colonel commandant.

It was therefore the bridal eve, and the elite, in beauty and chivalry, of Vera Cruz, had assembled at the commandant's elegant quarters in the grand and gloomy old castle, to see the fair Senorita Victorina made the Senora Guarena.

Into those elegant and well-appointed apartments the misery of the cells below came not, and the groans of the prisoners were not heard; but to the ears of them, not in dungeons too deep for sound to reach them, came the strains of music, which made their sufferings more intense, their cells darker, and the sorrow in their hearts deeper.

"Don Felipe Cosala to see the Senor Merlino," and the door of Merle's room was thrown open and in stepped the Monte Prince—smiling, elegant in appearance, and as courtly in manner as a Chesterfield.

"To what circumstance do I owe the honor of your visit, senor?" said Merle, coldly.

"Your missive, senor, sent to Colonel Guarena, was turned over by him to me, as this is his wedding-eve, and he begged me to call upon you. I am glad to welcome you back to Vera Cruz."

"I came, senor, to meet Major Guarena—"

"Colonel Guarena, senor, Colonel Guarena, for he is now commandant of the Castle San Juan de Uloa, having just been appointed."

"Be seated, senor," and Merle motioned to a chair, which the Monte Prince, with a bow of thanks, accepted.

Then Merle resumed, in a quiet tone:

"Colonel Guarena seems to have chosen a very inopportune time either for his duel with me, or his marriage. The life of a duelist, senor, hangs on a thread."

"True, and I am going to crave of you a favor for the colonel."

"Name it, senor."

"To appoint your meeting with him for the third evening from this, at sunset, on the beach, half a mile below the castle. He does not desire to face death and matrimony within twelve hours of each other."

"I will be at his service at the specified time and place. What weapons would best suit Colonel Guarena?"

The Monte Prince raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"The weapons are your choice, senor."

"I know it; but I am wholly indifferent as to swords or pistols."

"Then we will carry swords to the field; but, I warn you, Guarena is a superb swordsman, senor."

"So be it; swords shall be the weapons," and Merle bowed as though the interview were at an end.

"Will you be attended, senor, by a friend?"

"No, I will come alone; I have no friend in Vera Cruz upon whom I would call."

"Permit me to offer my services, senor Merlino. Don Real Juarez will be the friend of Colonel Guarena."

Merle glanced quickly at the Monte Prince, who still wore his hand in a silken sling, and

* There is a wide-spread idea at the North, among intelligent people, that a Creole is a negro, or one having negro blood in his veins; but this is a singular error, as a Creole is a native of Louisiana.

There was no mistaking the words, as he replied slowly:

"Senor, were I not in Mexico, and you were to make the offer you do, I would hurl you from yonder window to the plaza below."

The eyes of Don Felipe fairly blazed, but he asked in a perfectly even voice:

"Wherein is my offense, Senor Merlino?"

"I branded you as a cheat at cards, senor, some nights since, and you wear my mark in your hand, and will to your grave. Were I to select a second, it would be a gentleman."

"We will not quarrel, Senor Merlino; at least until after your affair with Colonel Guarena; then if you care to further entertain yourself during your stay in Vera Cruz, I am at your service wholly."

"If I meet you, Don Felipe Cosala, the Monte Prince, it will be to kick you from my path as I would a dog."

"A dog, even if he be a skulking cur, will often bite, senor," smiled Don Felipe.

"One must run those risks, senor. Have you aught more to say?"

"I would ask if you cared to dispose of the magnificent jewels you had the other evening—the ring, anchor and necklace?"

"You forget the dirk—perhaps you did not take a fancy to that?" and Merle smiled in a manner the one addressed could not but understand.

"Yes, I admired the dirk immensely; would you part with that too?"

"You certainly deserve to have two of the articles, senor?"

The gambler's eyes sparkled. Was Merle going to offer to sell them to him?

He had asked the question to see if Merle still had the articles with him, or had gotten rid of them during his absence, for, now that he had returned, he thought he saw the motive that had carried him away from Vera Cruz—to place his treasures out of danger, should harm befall him in his duel.

"Which two?" he asked, pleasantly.

"The necklace—to hang you with; and the dirk—in your craven heart."

The reply took the Monte Prince for once off his guard, and he sprung to his feet, his face in a fury.

"Maldito!" he hissed forth; but at once he became cool, and smiling, said:

"We will not quarrel, Senor Merlino."

"So it seems; you are a cur that takes many a kick without biting, Senor Cosala; your hide is impervious to stings, is it not?"

"Unless I so will, senor; one must keep cool in this warm climate."

"You certainly appear to think so."

"And you refuse my services as your second, Senor Merlino?"

"Assuredly; but if you are on the field, and consider yourself hurt at my words to-night, I will waive your not being a gentleman, and willingly give you satisfaction, for, so far as I have an idea you are an old enemy of mine; your face comes up to me as connected in some scene of devilry I have witnessed in the past, and it would give me pleasure to send a bullet through your brain, or run a sword through your coward heart; won't you oblige me, hey?"

"Your words shall not be forgotten, Senor Merlino. You know an old saying—*Un caballo haze sombra*." (The least hair makes a shadow.)

"So be it, senor. Adios."

"Buenas noches, Senor Merlino!" and with a smile the Monte Prince left the room.

"He means to meet me; he is not the man to take my insults calmly."

"Then I will avenge those who fell by his hand that night so long ago, and which comes vividly back to me now."

"I believe I am getting revengeful."

And Merle left his room for a walk in the streets.

CHAPTER V.

THE DUEL.

Upon the afternoon of the day appointed for the duel between Merle and Colonel Vistal Guarena, a small boat, with two oarsmen and a third person in the stern-sheets, was rowing slowly along the beach below that frowning and most formidable-looking structure known as the Castle San Juan de Uloa, and which supposed to be impregnable fort, gained for Vera Cruz the rather high-sounding title of the Iron Gate of Mexico. It certainly proved a gateway for our forces in the war between the United States and the land of the Montezumas.

Having reached a point half a mile below the castle the boat rowed shoreward, and the one in the stern-sheets sprung out upon the beach.

"Wait for me until the sun has been down half an hour; then, if I do not come, return without me."

"Si, Senor Caballero," said one of the boatmen, and touching his sombrero at the fee given him, he added:

"The caballero is most generous; *gracias*."

The person addressed turned and walked away, bearing a bundle under his arm.

A walk of a few hundred paces brought him to a small thicket in which stood an adobe hut, going to ruin, and now deserted.

Throwing down his bundle he leant against a tree, and with folded arms gazed toward the west where the sun was near its setting, and piling up mountains of gold and silver in the skies.

Presently the clatter of hoofs reached his ears, and two men dashed up to the hacienda, both well mounted.

Merle, for it was that personage, saluted them with a cold bow, while he said, quietly:

"*Mas vale tarde que nunca, senores.*" (Better late than never, my lords—or sirs.)

"We were detained, senor," shortly said the Monte Prince, as the two dismounted.

"And the Senor Juarez?" asked Merle turning to Colonel Guarena.

"Is otherwise engaged—Don Felipe will act for me."

"Then we may as well at once settle the matter between us."

"Unless you offer me an apology, senor, for your insult."

"I came not here, Colonel Guarena, to offer an apology! I appealed to you, believing you to be a brave man, to aid me in exposing this man as a scoundrel, and you refused, and the inference was that you were a coward or his ally; such, in spite of your high rank, I believe you to be."

Merle spoke with calm firmness, and the face of the Mexican officer flushed, while he replied:

"And you then desire that it shall be war between us?"

"*Guerra al cuchillo, senor*," (war to the knife, sir,) said Merle, with intense distinctness.

The two friends glanced at each other, and, as they had done several times before, turned their gaze in the direction from whence they had come.

"Do you expect others, Senor Colonel?" asked Merle, noticing their look.

"My servant, yes, senor, with my sword."

"You wear it at your side, Colonel Guarena."

"True; but not my dueling blade."

"I have a pair of rapiers here—they are just alike; and you can have your choice," and Merle drew from a buck-skin covering two real Damascus blades.

"I prefer to wait for my own weapon, Senor Merlino."

"And I have no time to dance attendance on you, Colonel Guarena. I am here at great personal inconvenience to give you a chance to run me through, as a satisfaction for an insult I hurled in your teeth, and if you care not to meet me I will return."

"Do you fear to remain, senor?"

"I am alone, senor, and you are two. I fear no man, yet I am in a land where treachery is considered an art, and it behooves me to be upon my guard."

"Will you meet me, or shall I bid you adios?"

Colonel Guarena stepped forward and spoke to the Monte Prince:

"What shall I do?" he asked, in a low tone.

"You are the best swordsman in the army; meet him with his rapiers, but don't hurt him; disarm him, and then we can make him prisoner."

"If you do not cross weapons he will return, and our work will be all to do over again, for he is suspicious now."

"Senor Merlino, as my servant is backward, I will use one of your rapiers, as it matters little to me what weapon I run you through with," said Colonel Guarena, haughtily.

"You are confident, senor; take your choice," and Merle held the two weapons toward his enemy.

"I am confident, senor, because I feel my power to prove my words."

"It may be so, Colonel Guarena, but—"

"But what, senor?" as Merle paused.

"But—I doubt it."

"Yet I repeat it, Senor Merlino, I can be taught nothing with the sword," said Colonel Guarena, in that pompous tone of boastfulness often used by Mexicans, and he placed himself in position.

Merle smiled, and said pointedly, as he took his stand:

"*El sabio muda concio, il nescio nos.*" (A wise man sometimes changes his opinion, a fool never.)

The reply infuriated Vistal Guarena and he began the attack with a savage oath upon his lips, and an angry light in his eyes.

From the very first he beat Merle back with his fierce thrusts, but the calm smile never left the face of the man who was then already doomed.

With an admiring glance the Monte Prince followed the every move of the combatants, saying several times to Merle:

"You are a superb swordsman, senor, to hold your own for an instant against Colonel Guarena."

Merle made no reply; but suddenly changed from the defensive to the offensive to the intense surprise of both his antagonist and Don Felipe.

Now he seemed to enter with spirit into the combat, while before he had evidently been playing with the Mexican.

"Sainted Virgin! boy, he will kill you!" cried the now alarmed Monte Prince, as Merle's swordsmanship became simply superb in every motion, and he drove the now pallid and really frightened Mexican back over the ground he had just won.

"Good God! Vistal, beware!" again shouted Don Felipe, pressing nearer and with his unwounded arm thrust into his bosom.

Instantly a skillful maneuver of Merle's brought him so that his antagonist's back was toward the Monte Prince, while he faced him; he had seen the act of the gambler, and shouted:

"Don Felipe, drop your hand to your side or I will shoot you down!"

As Merle spoke, he quickly drew a silver-mounted dueling pistol with his disengaged hand.

He seemed to hold the eye of the Monte Prince and Colonel Guarena too, and the gambler obeyed, now as deadly pale as was the Mexican officer, who fought with the desperation of despair, for he well knew his life was at stake—he had been taught something in swordsmanship.

"Aid me, or he will kill me!" suddenly cried Colonel Guarena, losing all nerve, and as he spoke there was heard the sound of hoof-strokes.

The Monte Prince turned quickly in the direction of the sound, but a cry from Colonel Guarena caused him to spring to his side. Merle had run him through the body.

"Sainted Maria! he has killed me!" groaned the wounded man, as the Monte Prince lowered him to the ground.

Wiping the stain from his rapier, Merle faced the Monte Prince:

"Senor, I am at your service now."

As he spoke, a score of *Lanceros* dashed up to the spot, drawing rein in a circle round the dismounted party.

"Seize that murderer, Senor Juarez!" yelled the Monte Prince, in tones of thunder.

A score of lances pointed at the breast of Merle—resistance was vain, and without a word he surrendered himself a prisoner.

Had he known what was to follow, he would have died then and there, with his good rapier in hand, rather than lay down his arms and expect mercy from his captors.

CHAPTER VI.

BLOOD-MONEY.

It was with no little surprise depicted upon his face that Major Real Juarez—for the young man had been promoted to the rank formerly held by Vistal Guarena—gazed upon the scene before him in the gathering twilight.

"Your tardiness, Major Juarez, has caused this. Now, make all amends in your power," sternly commanded the Monte Prince.

"My delay was unavoidable, Don Felipe; the Senora Guarena demanded my presence as I was about to leave the castle; important dispatches had arrived from the Capital—is the Governor* severely wounded?" and he bent over Vistal Guarena, who was breathing heavily.

"Desperately so, I fear. I have stanchd the bleeding as well as is in my power, and I wish you to have him borne with all haste to the castle. I will look after this prisoner," and the Monte Prince turned toward Merle.

"Senor, for the present you are a prisoner, and must submit to being ironed."

Merle made no reply, and his wrists were at once encircled by the chains.

"Now, senor, we will mount and ride on; please take this horse," and the steed of Colonel Guarena was led up. Merle quickly mounted, with the aid of the Monte Prince, who then sprung into his saddle, and followed by a dozen *Lanceros*, they rode away.

Behind them followed Major Juarez with the wounded Governor, borne upon the lances of the soldiers.

When Merle found himself in the saddle, his first impulse was to dash away, and ride, ironed as he was, into Vera Cruz.

But a second thought convinced him that as a stranger he would have no influence there to counteract the power of the Castle's Governor and that of the Monte Prince, who he now knew was all powerful.

If he appealed to the United States Consul at Vera Cruz it would have to be in his proper person of Merle Grenville, and under that name he was already outlawed by his Government, and a price set upon his head.

No; he must accept the alternative and trust to luck for escape.

By his side rode the Monte Prince, a smile upon his face, and behind came the *Lanceros*, their lances in rest.

In a short while they drew rein upon the beach, where a small boat awaited; it was the intention of the wary gambler to enter the castle by the sea entrance.

Entering the boat, in which sat two oarsmen in the castle uniform, the Monte Prince and his prisoner were rowed rapidly away, the *Lan-*

*The commandant of the Castle San Juan de Uloa is more properly called the Governor, no matter what may be his military rank.—THE AUTHOR

heroes returning to join their comrades who carried the wounded Governor.

A short row and the boat touched at the castle stairs; the party disembarked, and were met by a file of soldiers who marched them through a gateway near the bastions.

"Captain of the guard, lead this prisoner to one of the deep sea cells, and, upon your life, see to it that he escapes not," said the Monte Prince, whose word was law even in that grim old castle.

The young officer addressed saluted politely, and replied:

"Upon my life be it, señor. In the water dungeons, you say?"

"Yes, to one of those beneath the sea."

"And iron him, señor?"

"Assuredly," and the Monte Prince walked away, while Merle was led off to the lowest of the castle dungeons.

Turning into a broad corridor the Monte Prince ascended a stone stairway until he came to a second hallway leading to the left, and this he followed, through innumerable turnings with which he seemed perfectly familiar, until he found himself still surrounded by stone walls, but where the gloom was banished by draperies of velvet and silken curtains which but half concealed broad windows.

At a massive mahogany doorway, studded with silver nails, he pulled a bell-cord, and a servant in livery bade him enter.

"The Senora Guarena?"

"Is in her boudoir, señor," replied the servant.

"I will seek her there; now go with all haste and bid the surgeons of the castle to come hither; then bid the officers to allow no noises about the castle."

"Si, señor," and the servant, who was a pure Mexican, not of Spanish descent, but one of the race of the Indian Montezumas, darted away upon his errand, while the Monte Prince crossed the gorgeously-furnished apartment, and knocked at an inner door that was ajar.

No voice bade him enter, and he stepped within the room, a chamber used as half library, half sitting-room, and filled with a lavish display of creature comforts and luxuries.

The room was vacant, but a sweet voice called out from an adjoining cabinet-de-toilette:

"Vistal, is that you?"

"Lady Guarena, it is your very humble servant, Don Felipe."

The next instant there swept into the room a vision of rare loveliness—a woman of eighteen, voluptuous in form, beautiful in face, and a dark olive skin tinted with carnation, and blue-black masses of hair coiled about her head.

She was exquisitely dressed in canary silk, *en train*, and with a tight-fitting *basquina* that fitted her to perfection.

In her hair was a comb of sapphires, and a necklace of like stones encircled her fair throat, while wide bands of rich yellow gold were upon her wrists.

Two rings only were upon her hands—a band of gold on her wedding finger, and upon the first finger of the same hand was the *solitaire* diamond—the one which the Monte Prince had taken from Zulah—the mate of the stone Merle had sent to Mildred Monteith by Merton Ainslie.

At her wedding the Monte Prince had placed the rare gem upon her finger. *Of course he had a motive.*

This beautiful creature was Senora Victorine Guarena—a three days' bride—an imperial beauty—an heiress, and one who dearly loved the reckless, wild, unprincipled man she had married.

"Don Felipe!" exclaimed the lovely woman, as her eyes fell upon the Monte Prince, a man whom she feared, yet admired, was ever glad to see, yet always held the wish that he had remained away.

His magnificent present to her, the night of her marriage, had surprised her beyond measure.

She had heard he was a professional gambler; that he played an unfair game, and had killed a man who cursed him after he had won his last peso.

But he was ever courtly, ever brilliant in conversation, and she admired him—nay, he fascinated her as a snake would a bird.

"Senora Victorine, I am here as the forerunner of ill tidings. Come, sit down here, and let me tell you that which will pain your heart to the core."

"Vistal! my husband!" gasped the lovely bride, sinking down into a *fauteuil*.

"It is of Vistal I would speak—he is wounded."

"Wounded! *Santissima Maria!* Where is he?" and the woman trembled violently.

"He will soon be here, and—"

"Don Felipe, you say that my husband is wounded, but you did not say *by whom?*" and a vengeful flash came into the glorious dark eyes.

"It was in the *duello*: a stranger to Vera Cruz ran his sword through his side."

"His sword! Why the Governor, Guarena, was the best swordsman in Mexico!" said the lady, proudly.

"Don Merlino, a *Ranchero* from Corpus Christi, proved to the contrary, lady; but you must be calm, for it will need all your strength to nurse him back to life."

"He is dangerously wounded, then, señor? Why did you not tell me this at once?" and the face grew paler.

"He is dangerously wounded, senora; but he will soon be brought here. Hold! I have made every arrangement for his reception, and the surgeons are summoned, and I would suggest that you change your *toilette* to receive him."

"Jesu! what care I for dress where life is at stake, and his life, señor?"

"He is here," said the Monte Prince, as voices were heard, and he placed his hand upon the arm of the woman to restrain her impulse to rush forward and throw herself down beside her wounded husband.

"Be calm, or your excitement might prove fatal to him," he said, calmly, and she obeyed.

The *Lanceros* marched into the room, still bearing their burden, and he was placed upon a cot, while the surgeons gathered around him.

The young bride gazed down into the white face, and her own was nearly as white; but she uttered no cry, as she sunk down upon her knees beside the cot and lightly kissed the forehead.

"Señor!" and she looked imploringly up into the face of the chief surgeon.

"I will soon tell you, lady Guarena, if there is hope," responded the surgeon, understanding her glance, and he set to work with his assistants to discover whether the Castle de Uloa would soon be without a Governor.

"It is a most ugly wound, piercing through and through his body, and he has lost much blood. He may live—he may die; the chances are he will—live."

"Holy Mary, I thank thee," breathed the young wife, and she glided from the room.

Still the Monte Prince remained, and one by one the attendants dropped away, until only the second surgeon, who had been appointed to watch beside the wounded Governor, and Don Felipe remained.

"Señor Mejia, you were to have paid me two thousand pesos, last night," said the Monte Prince quietly, turning upon the assistant-surgeon of the castle.

"Si, señor; but it was impossible. Oh, señor, I am ruined, for I have not a peso in the world, and my pay is hypothecated to Moncardo, the Jew. Señor Don Felipe, I am ruined," and the Mexican groaned in bitter anguish.

"You should not gamble, Señor Mejia. You play badly, and have no nerve; what will you do?"

"Die!"

The Mexican hissed out the word, savagely.

"Doubtless you know the easiest and pleasantest method, being an alchemist; but *living* is preferable to dying, señor."

"I dare not, Don Felipe."

"Let me see, Mejia, you owe me two thousand pesos; how much more?"

"All I have is pledged, señor, and I am in debt a thousand pesos besides," groaned the debt-crushed man.

"In all, how much, I ask?"

"Four thousand pesos would clear me, señor."

"That amount would save your life, you mean?"

"Si, Señor Don Felipe."

"Well, here is your due-bill to me, and here are three thousand pesos. You need owe nothing now, Señor Mejia, and yet have a good sum over."

The Mexican stood aghast. What did this kindness mean on the part of the Monte Prince.

Approaching nearer and lowering his tone, Don Felipe resumed:

"Señor Mejia, his *Excellencia*, Governor Guarena, will live, I believe?"

"Si, señor; with care the chances are in his favor, had as seems the wound."

"No fear of internal hemorrhages?"

"Yes, señor, there is danger, but—"

"Suppose one were to occur, it would prove fatal, doubtless?"

"Yes, señor, I fear so."

"And if a second one were to occur it would certainly prove fatal?"

"Without any doubt, Don Felipe."

"Señor Mejia," and the Monte Prince bent over the wounded man.

"Si, señor."

"You will have to stop this bleeding. See, the Governor bleeds freely."

As he spoke the Monte Prince passed his hand quickly over the wound, and the red stream of life burst forth.

Aghast, the Mexican surgeon started back, a cry upon his lips; but the calm voice of the Monte Prince recalled him to himself.

"Be quick, Señor Mejia, or the Governor may bleed to death. Perhaps this may stanch the blood."

A roll of notes were in the outstretched hand, and Benito Mejia saw at a glance they doubled the amount just given him, and a gleam of devilish joy flashed over his face as he thrust them into his bosom, while he called out:

"Ring for my chief, señor!"

The Monte Prince ordered a servant in the ante-room to call the chief surgeon, and then came back again to the side of the wounded man.

"This hemorrhage can be stopped, Señor Mejia?"

"Yes, Don Felipe."

"But a second one, say in a day or two, would prove fatal?"

"Yes, Don Felipe."

"You will be constantly in attendance, Señor Mejia?"

"Si, señor."

"Then I leave the case in your hands; you will see to it?"

"Yes, Don Felipe," replied Benito Mejia, in a hoarse voice, while he turned deadly pale; but he held his blood-money and could not recede from the step he had taken.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MEXICAN JUNTA.

IN the grand old city of Mexico, where the Montezumas once ruled in barbaric magnificence, and where the "Children of the Sun" fell before their Spanish conquerors, a body of men sat in conclave within the walls of the Mexican capital.

It was the second day following the duel between Merle and the Governor of the Castle San Juan de Uloa, and those gathered in council were the Mexican *Junta*, the men who held in their grasp much of the governmental power of that unfortunate war-ridden land.

News had been brought to them of the duel, and that the castle was in danger of being without a Governor, and they were discussing the merits and influence of a number of distinguished personages, soldiers and statesmen, for the successor of Vistal Guarena, should he die.

The discussion was not a calm one, either, for the armed sentinels at the outer doors occasionally heard some voice raised in angry denunciation, and echoing through the gilded rooms with threatening ring.

And such denunciation was hurled upon his fellow-members of the *Junta* by one who held no fear for himself, whose life was *sans reproche*, and whose acts had been open and above-board as soldier and statesman.

He had cried down the injury done great men, by the appointment of Vistal Guarena to be Governor of that famous old pile, the San Juan de Uloa.

"The Guarenas are Mexicans, and true ones; they have wealth, and their name is well known affixed to military titles, while they are the warm supporters of the Government in power," he thundered forth, in ringing tones.

"But, for a wise body of men to place over the Iron Gate of Mexico, to give the key of our sunny land into the keeping of a mere boy, though that boy be a *Guarena*, is a symptom of idiocy I did not think this honorable *Junta* would be guilty of, and I glory in the thought that I was not present to affix my signature to the order, which was a slight upon the famous chieftains of our nation—men who have bled on a hundred fields of battle and grown gray in the harness of a soldier."

"A good youth enough, and a dashing soldier; but one who should hide his diminished head in the very presence of those whom the imbecility of this august body placed him over."

"Out upon such ingratitude to the men of Mexico, when a boy, under the basilisk eye of a gambler, can rule the holy castle of the San Juan de Uloa."

"The señor Governor may be even now dead, and the words of the Señor Rozales may be hurled at a corpse," said one of the *Junta*, arising, and interrupting the fiery orator.

"So be it; so much greater the honor to the old castle not to be ruled by a boy."

"And ye sit here, señors, to place in his shoes a man of no more renown—the *Capitan Santa Anna*."

"Has Mexico so fallen that beardless boys must be given the power that only heroes should hold?"

"You say that Don Felipe Cosala asked the appointment of Vistal Guarena to be governor of the castle? And who is Don Felipe Cosala? I will answer for you—an adventurer—an unknown—a gambler—a professional duelist—a secret agent of the Government, called by the *Americanos* a spy."

"Are your secret lives such, señors, that a spy can make demands that you must grant?"

"And who is the friend of the *Capitan Santa Anna*?"

"His own sword," cried a voice.

"Then he has my voice in his favor, when older men with swords as keen, refuse the castle's governorship. What is it, Señor Abello?"

"A messenger from Vera Cruz has just arrived, bearing important tidings."

"Bid him enter. The Boy Governor is doubtless dead; if so, he has solved the riddle of death, and is wiser than any of us," scornfully said the Señor José Rozales.

A moment after, and through the massive

* At the period referred to above Santa Anna was a very young man.

portals of the assembly room, came the tall form and dark, fascinating face of the Monte Prince.

Every man in that *Junta* knew Don Felipe Cosala, and the faces of two-thirds of them grew a shade paler.

As he advanced to the center of the chamber, the Senor Jose Rozales sprung again to his feet.

"Aha! you have come as the messenger from Vera Cruz," and there was a sneer in his tone.

"I have, Senor Rozales, and like the raven, my presence here foretells ill-tidings," calmly said Don Felipe.

"Death generally follows your footsteps, senor; you have come to tell us that the Castle San Juan de Uloa is without a Governor?"

"It is true, Senor Rozales; a second hemorrhage from the wound caused the death of the Governor Guarena."

"And his young bride?" kindly said Rozales.

"Is inconsolable, senores."

"In her eyes he was everything; in the eyes of Mexico he was nothing—so let him pass away. Your business here is ended, Senor Cosala?"

"No, Senor Rozales."

"Ah, yes; the one who killed the Governor—what of him?"

"Is in a cell in the castle, Senor Rozales."

"Hail the challenge passed was an open and fair one; why imprison him?" angrily said the Senor Rozales.

"The insult was open, the challenge and acceptance fair; but Don Merlino ran his sword through the body of his *Excellenza*, without warning; the Governor Guarena was unarmed."

"Ah! say you so? Then he must die."

"Yes, senor, or live in a dungeon the remainder of his days; that were better than killing him."

"Of that the next Governor of the Castle must decide; now, Senor Cosala, *adios*."

But the Monte Prince moved not; he smiled pleasantly, and said in his soft, musical tones:

"Senores, I have come to name the successor of the Governor Guarena."

Had a thunderbolt fallen into that gilded room, smashing to atoms the mirrors, chandeliers and gold-inlaid furniture, it could not have created a wilder excitement.

Every Mexican was upon his feet—every eye turned upon the Monte Prince, who stood perfectly calm in their midst.

"You! You! Who are you, that you dare dictate to the *Junta* of Mexico?"

Senor Jose Rozales hurled the words from his mouth as though they were intended to annihilate the gambler; but they did not change the smile on the dark, calm face, or cause a muscle to quiver.

He merely answered in the most even and matter-of-fact tones:

"I am Don Felipe Cosala, senores, a secret agent of the Government of Mexico, and the one who named Colonel Vistal Guarena for the Governorship of the castle, San Juan de Uloa."

"You are a nameless adventurer!" yelled Senor Rozales.

The Monte Prince bowed, his hand upon his breast; but there came through his white teeth the quick reply:

"The more dishonor upon this honorable *Junta* when I have the will and the power to enforce my demand."

For a few moments there was the wildest excitement, and angry voices in denunciation, and voices in entreaty, were heard, while the Monte Prince stood in silence, calmly surveying the wild scene his words had caused.

At length the *Junta* divided off in little groups of two and three each; but two men stood alone, Senor Jose Rozales and the Monte Prince.

"Senores!"

All started at the ringing voice.

"You heard this man's demand? Return to your seats and let us see what power he holds over us."

The members silently obeyed.

"Now, Senor Spy: name your friend for the exalted office of Governor of the Castle," and the Senor Rozales bent his searching eyes upon the Monte Prince.

Perfectly unmoved, and in a voice that never wavered, came the answer:

"I seek the office, senores, for myself!"

Once more did the words of the Monte Prince create a mad scene of excitement, and several hands went into their bosoms as though to draw forth a blade and strike the offender dead.

But, gradually, there came a calm over all, and once more the Senor Rozales spoke, but his voice had lost its trumpet ring; it was low and husky with suppressed passion:

"Senores, Don Felipe Cosala has demanded that he receive the appointment of Governor and Colonel Commandant of the Castle San Juan de Uloa. Such an honor can only be bestowed upon him by a two-thirds voice of our august *Junta*."

"Let us take that vote and decide whether he go at once to the lowest dungeon in that castle, for his arrogance and insulting demand, or goes there as the Governor of that noble old fortress!"

"If the former, his punishment will be just; if the latter—then God help Mexico, when her rulers are fallen to lot!"

In silence the vote was cast—each man voting with blanched face and trembling hand.

Then they were taken from the golden casket by Senor Rozales, and two others, passing through the hands of each.

When the last vote was counted the noble orator, Rozales, uttered a cry of anguish, and bowing his head, walked with tottering step from the gilded chamber.

The Monte Prince had won.

CHAPTER VIII.

BURIED ALIVE.

WHEN Merle was led away by the Captain of the Guard, and securely guarded between two files of soldiers, he felt a chill come over his heart, for he knew that a prisoner entering that gloomy pile must leave hope behind.

Along the whole length of a corridor his guards led him, until they halted at a massive gateway, through which they were admitted by a stern-looking keeper, armed to the teeth.

Turning into a passage-way, faintly lighted by iron lamps set in niches in the wall, they gradually descended until they came to a central hall or nave, from which various tunnels, for they were nothing more, led off in different directions.

The mouths, or entrances, to these stone passages, radiating from this point, were all open, excepting one; before this was a heavy iron door, which the guide unlocked and drew back.

Into this the party passed, and then began to descend a stone stairway, of half a hundred steps, at the bottom of which was a long, narrow avenue, dimly lighted by a lamp that burned with sickly luster, as if despairing to pierce that gloomy recess with artificial light.

Here an old man, almost a giant in size, came forward to meet them, a half-dozen heavy iron keys at his leathern girdle.

"A prisoner, good Lamas, for your accursed tier of cells; he goes in the water dungeon," said the officer of the guard.

The man turned a look upon Merle, examining him critically from head to foot; but there was no pity in his look—it was as stony as the walls with which they were surrounded.

"So be it, Senor Capitan; he goes in Dungeon Number One," quickly said the jailer.

"It is a good thing to be number one, Lamas, and I advise you to look out for number one, for if he escapes your life will be the forfeit," said the captain of the guard, perpetrating a coarse joke.

"Useless advice, Senor Capitan, for no one ever escapes from here unless Death opens the doors," grimly said the jailer.

"Here is Number One, senor; enter!" and he opened the narrow iron door, and motioned to Merle to step within.

Quickly he obeyed, glancing around him to see what the jailer's lamp would reveal.

"I am no wild beast to be ironed in a dungeon like this," said Merle, for the first time showing any emotion.

"You must be more dangerous than a wild beast, senor, to be put here," answered the jailer.

"I will die here," and Merle shuddered at the damp walls, the close smell of the dungeon, and the dash of the waters heard against the outer walls.

"*Poco a poco, senor*," (little by little, sir) was the answer of the jailer.

And it was no wonder that the unfortunate prisoner shuddered at the cell that was to inclose him within its stony arms—a room of ten feet square, height and width, and lighted by a crevice, rather than a window, in the ceiling, and through which the brightness of day alone could penetrate, for it was cut through many feet of solid masonry. Upon one side of the wall was a wooden bench, upon which lay a pallet of moss; a stool for a seat, a stone pitcher, a bucket and a table constituted the furniture of the room; no, not all the furniture, as fastened to the wall by huge staples, were two long chains, ornamented at the end by anklets of steel, and in both of these rings were human bones, showing that the prisoner, whoever he had been, had died in chains, for the remainder of the skeleton was stretched upon the floor.

"You have a skeleton in your closet, senor," said the captain of the guard, with a light laugh.

"*Locos y niños digon la verdad*," (Children and fools speak the truth,) was the quick retort of Merle.

"To be ironed, Senor Capitan?" asked the jailer.

"Of course, both ankles," angrily said the Mexican officer, not liking the suppressed laugh of some of his men at Merle's reply to him.

The dry bones were shaken out of the anklets, a key on the jailer's girdle was found to open them, and Merle was chained to the wall.

"Now, senor, I will bid you *adios*," and the captain of the guard turned away, and was followed by the jailer.

A moment after their footsteps died away, and Merle was left alone with his thoughts—left in that dismal dungeon, for aught he knew, to die there.

Rattling his chains savagely, as if even that sound were music to his ears, he groaned aloud:

"Oh, God in heaven! *I am buried alive!*"

In bitter anguish that long night passed on, the poor prisoner standing upright in his tracks, his brain dizzy, his heart throbbing, and his flesh burning with the intensity of his emotions.

At length, after what seemed ages, a grayish light stole adown the long, narrow crevice which served as a window, and Merle knew that the dawn had come.

No sound now greeted his ears, for there was no wind blowing, and a calm rested upon the waters, and the waves never broke heavily against the outer walls of his cell, except when there was a fresh breeze.

Still standing, the prisoner glanced around him by the dim light, but he could see little to cheer him; the darkness was too great there to see any thing, excepting where the light from the window fell, and, as if to remind him of his fate, the skull lay just where the dull rays fell upon it, and there seemed upon the bony face a hideous grin at the thought that another must suffer as he had done.

At length there came the creak of a key in the door, and the jailer appeared, bearing a clay dish, a loaf of bread and a jar of water.

"Your day's allowance, senor: *olla podrida*," (a kind of stew—a favorite dish in Mexico), "good bread and fresh water."

"I need no food, jailer," sternly said Merle.

"You will soon, senor. Let me knock the irons off your wrists. Your arms at least can be free."

"*Gracias!* Now tell me how long must I remain here?"

The jailer made no reply; he silently pointed to the grinning skull.

"You mean I must die here?"

The jailer crossed the cell to the wide bench that served as a bed; this he turned over, and his lantern glared upon a hideous sight—a sight that made even Merle, strong as was his nerve, start, for fully a dozen skeletons lay there in a mass.

"I swept these up when I brought him here. I'll put him with them, if you say so," and the jailer put his foot upon the skull in the center of the room.

"This is a perfect *Golgotha*. Do you wish me to understand that all these men died here?"

"Yes, senor."

"And what crimes did they commit?"

"*Quien sabe?*" (who knows?)

"How long since this poor wretch died?"

"Five years, senor."

"How long have you been jailer here?"

"Thirty years, senor."

"And these men have died during your guardianship?"

"Yes, senor; those twelve and this one."

"Men do not live very long here in your Mexican climate, jailer," said Merle, grimly.

"*Presto maduro, presto podrido, senor*, (soon ripe soon rotten), was the too suggestive reply of the man.

"And you expect to die here as jailer?"

"No, senor, I am laying up treasures upon earth to be happy as soon as I have a comfortable sum, replied the man."

"Ha! you love gold, then?"

"Si, senor, it is my life."

"Suppose I were to tell you that I am not ambitious for my bones to mingle with those already here, what would you say, old man?"

"*Remuda de pasturage haze bizerros gordos, senor*," (change of pasture makes fat calves), answered the old man, evasively.

"Here, is not this a pleasanter sound than the clinking of my chains?" and Merle rattled several pieces of gold together.

"It is sweet music, senor."

"I am glad you appreciate it, for I am not a beggar though in a dungeon, and I would have you aid me," said Merle, eagerly.

The jailer made no reply, but flashed his light into the prisoner's face, as if to see there what he might expect from him as a golden souvenir, should he aid him.

"Will gold tempt you, jailer?" asked Merle.

"*No ay cerradura si es de oro la ganzua, senor*," (there is no lock but a golden key will open it), was the answer of the old man, whose habit seemed to be to reply in quaint sentences or applicable Spanish proverbs.

"Ha! say you so? Then here is gold," and Merle took from a belt he wore a number of golden *onzas*.

"Here, grease your locks with these, and when I am free you shall have more; but hasten, for already I feel benumbed in this black, damp hole, and I will die if I stay here long."

The man dropped the gold in his pocket, and at the remark of Merle, gave a shrug of his shoulder, while he replied:

"*El corazon manda las carnes, senor*, (the heart bears up the body).

"True, and if other men have lived here for months, I suppose I can, for I have not a craven heart; but still, *amigo*, I wish you to aid me from here as soon as you can, for I have much to attend to that needs my immediate presence."

"It is far from here to sunlight, senor; but I will do all that I can," and the jailer turned away, and Merle was again alone—alone until

the old man came the following morning with more food—the same as before.

But he found that which he had brought twenty-four hours before untasted.

"You must eat, señor."

"Not until I hunger; speak, old man, what hope?"

"Señor, there are many locks to open—a handful of gold will not go above the second tier of jailers."

"Here is more—take the belt."

"You have more, señor?"

"Yes, twenty *onzas*, here," and Merle drew forth a buckskin purse.

"This may be sufficient—I will see first," and the old man again left the cell, and twenty-four long and dreary hours dragged their tiresome length away.

Then the jailer again appeared, bringing more *olla podrida*, bread and water.

"The señor has eaten of his dish, I see?"

"Yes, I care not to starve. Well?"

"It was not enough, señor."

"Here, I have not another *peso*," and Merle gave away his last piece of money.

"To-morrow, señor."

So saying, the man again departed, and the poor prisoner held hope for the morrow; but alas, it brought the jailer but not freedom.

"You have no more gold, señor?"

"None; I have given you all I had with me."

"*Gracias, señor*; it will not be long before I can cease to be a jailer. *Adios*."

"And am I forgotten?" said Merle, the words of the man sending an icy chill to his heart.

"The world has forgotten you, señor, or will forget you; but I will bring you your daily bread."

"And this is all that I may expect from you?"

"The bread, the *olla podrida* and the water—all, señor."

"*Diablo!*"

It was all that Merle could say; but the old wretch stepped back from the reach of his arm, as he caught his flashing eyes.

"The Governor Guarena is dead, señor; your hand killed him, and you will find this your tomb. *Adios*."

So saying, he turned away, and Merle was again alone.

CHAPTER IX.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

TEN days passed away—ten days of long agony to the poor prisoner in his dismal dungeon, to whom no change came—only the darkness by night, the semi-darkness by day, and the matutinal visit of Lamas, the jailer, who came at a certain hour, always bearing the same dish of *podrida*, the coarse bread, and fresh water.

But changes had taken place in the castle, for Governor Vistal Guarena, whose life had been a short and merry one, had been carried to his grave, Benito Mejia having earned his blood-money, and the old pile had been for a short while without a Governor.

Then came a new one, and to the surprise of all, it was Felipe Cosala, the Monte Prince!

The poor Senora Guarena had been almost stunned by her grief—a widowed bride, just as she had crossed the threshold of happiness.

But in her sorrow Don Felipe, the new Governor, had been to her all that a brother could be, and begged that she would retain her rooms in the castle as long as she desired, while he took up his quarters in the officers' wing.

But the senora could not remain there without adding to her grief, and she procured a small house in the outskirts of Vera Cruz, and thither she moved several days after the burial of her husband.

When her bright face had at length gone from the castle Don Felipe took up his quarters in the rooms set apart for the Governors, and the tiger began to rule with a velvet paw, beneath which were claws sharp and deadly, ready to tear the flesh of any unfortunate that offended.

Don Felipe was a man who kept his own counsel, and what he did he took the responsibility of; hence he made Benito Mejia chief surgeon at once, and gave to Real Juarez the position he had occupied under Vistal Guarena, while he made other changes, chopping off and putting on heads—figuratively speaking—to meet his own humor and plans.

With a talent for ruling, an iron will, and fearless of all consequences, Governor Felipe Cosala, the Colonel Commandant, had the Castle San Juan de Uloa in perfect order, and under unswerving discipline, twenty-four hours after he took command, and, from the jailer of the water, or deep-sea dungeons, to the sentinels on the towers, all knew that they had to chalk a line on the edge of a precipice, over which the slightest swerving would hurl them.

What the people thought, what the army said, at his appointment, Governor Cosala did not care; he had played for power, and he had won the game, and now he was about to shuffle his cards, so to speak, and begin a new deal, for there was another stake he was to gamble for—the widow of his own son—the beautiful Senora Victorine.

She was lovely beyond compare—she was immensely wealthy, and her family were powerful in the land.

If he failed in a plot he had to gain treasure untold, why the widow would suit him.

If his plot for vast riches proved successful, he would cast the widow off, leave Mexico, and seek the earth's center—Paris, the great French capital.

First he must see if his well-laid plan would miscarry or not, and he gave the bell a pull that brought a servant in a twinkling.

"Send the Captain of the Guard here."

"*Si, Señor Excellenza*," and the servant went off like the wind.

Nor did the Captain of the Guard tarry in obeying; he did what no officer had before done in the castle, except on urgent business—he came at a trot, and arrived breathless, yet dared not breathe aloud.

"I would go to the deep-sea cells, señor; conduct me there!"

"Your servant, *Excellenza*," and the captain doubled himself up like a harlequin.

In fifteen minutes more Governor Cosala stood at the door of Dungeon Number One, and Lamas, the jailer, with somewhat nervous fingers, for he had heard of the velvet paw and iron claws beneath, was fumbling for his keys.

At last the narrow iron door was opened, and taking the lamp from the jailer's hand, the Governor said sternly to those in attendance:

"Await me at the end of the corridor!"

Then he stepped into the terrible den, and turned the light of the iron lamp upon the prisoner.

Merle was seated upon his rude cot, both ankles in irons, but his arms free, and he turned his eyes upon the Governor as he entered.

"Well, Señor Merlino, these are not cheerful quarters I find you in; but with the death of Governor Guarena, and other duties, I had almost forgotten you," said the Commandant, with courtly grace.

"I would ask, señor, why I am here, and what power you have, as a mere gambler, to hold me here?" haughtily returned Merle.

"My power is great, señor, as you will know, for, like Othello, 'My occupation's gone,' as I am now Governor of this Castle."

"You! How has Mexico fallen, when a low devil, such as you, can hold high rank among her people! Your position should have been that of executioner, or to supersede this jailer who cares for me daily. By Heaven! what a princely scoundrel you are."

"Señor, we are not now in your room at the hotel; there, I told you that *un cabello haze sombra*,* and you will find it so."

"Perhaps; and you are the Governor of the San Juan de Uloa?" asked Merle, with a sneer.

"*Si, señor, contra fortuna no vale arte ninguna*." (There's no fence against Fortune).

"Or the devil," laughed Merle, and then he added, quickly: "There is an old Italian proverb, Señor Governor, which says, '*a cader va chi troppo alto sale*.'" (Who climbs too high gets a fall).

"I understand you, señor, thanks to having had an Italian wife in early life, who taught me her sweet language; but when I fall, great will be the crash thereof, for I will crowd hell with those who go with me."

Governor Cosala spoke with the intensest distinctiveness of vindictiveness which made Merle mutter again in Italian: "*Il Diavolo lo fece, e poi rompe la stampa*." (The devil made him and then broke the mold).

With his hand upon his heart, Governor Felipe Cosala bowed low:

"I thank you, señor, I am glad that I am not like other people; it is such a bore to always remind one of somebody else."

"Yet strange, Señor Governor, with all the people in the world, that there are not more exactly alike. With one model for man and another for woman, it strikes me as remarkable, that men and women should be so unlike, among millions of imitations of the original."

"The señor is inclined to enter upon a lengthy discussion on the dissimilarity of mankind; but I came not here for that purpose," sneered the Governor.

"True, I forgot that his Satanic Majesty had just returned to Hades to torture a victim," and Merle glanced around him at his dungeon and then upon the Governor, to whom, with hand on his heart, he bowed low, in mock respect.

"You are inclined to be facetious, señor."

"And you to object to my every humor. Pray tell me why you have come here? This place is bad enough without your presence."

"I have come to offer you your freedom."

"Yes, devil-like, give my body freedom if you can keep my soul. Your terms, señor!"

"Ah! you understand, then, that I have terms to offer?"

"I know you, Don Felipe Cosala—you never act without some hellish motive."

"*Merle Freelance, I know you, too!*"

The words were hissed from the lips of the now infuriated Governor; but they did not create the shock he expected.

"I see that you know me, and I would re-

* The least hair makes a shadow.

mind you that I escaped from the Moro Castle," was the calm reply.

"You can never escape from my power, Merle, son of Freelance the Buccaneer."

"I doubt it, *amigo Felipe*; I was never born to be drowned, hung, or to die in a dungeon. Fate has been unkind to me, but I am not subdued or hopeless."

"You have a brave heart, señor," said the Governor, struck with admiration at the pluck of his prisoner.

"And you a coward heart, Governor Felipe Cosala."

"This to me?" yelled the Governor.

"Ay, and more, were I free from these chains, incarnate fiend that you are."

"Ha! ha! ha! I am a fool to argue with a man over his own grave."

"Then cease the argument, señor, and tell me why you called me Merle Freelance!"

"For I know you to be the son of that famous pirate. You are the image of your father, in more ways than one."

"You had the honor of knowing Captain Freelance, then?"

"Yes, to my cost; he had me hung to the yard-arm."

"How well he knew what you deserved! Tell me why you did not remain hung?"

"I escaped—no matter how, and I sought revenge on him, *through you, boy*."

"Yes; you killed those who protected me. I know your face well, señor; it was stamped up on my memory never to be erased; but I would know more of your history; why did my father have you hung?"

"For murdering my wife. I was an officer upon his vessel—perhaps you have heard of Red Manuel? and Felipe Cosala seemed to gloat in telling of his wickedness."

"Yes, I know you now, well, by hearsay, for your name was often on the men's lips; but I never knew that you escaped death when hung to the yard-arm. You were fortunate and mankind unfortunate."

"I escaped because I would not die, and I have lived to revenge myself upon you."

"So be it; you have the power; but, tell me, how did you know me, as I was an infant, when you left Mexico with my father in the schooner?"

"I kept track of you, boy, and when I returned to Mexico, I looked you up and took you from those who had charge of you; but there is one thing I would know—who took you from the Mexican fisherman with whom I left you?"

"The Buccaneers of the Caribbean. I was left by them at Kingston, Jamaica, to die; but I drifted on board of some vessel bound to Europe, and thus floated from ship to ship until I was found by my father. I had forgotten those days and scenes of my early childhood until your hated face recalled them vividly from the past. I knew you as my enemy, the night I drove that knife through your hand. What a mistake I made then! I should have driven it into your heart!"

"It would have been impossible, as you would find out, if you were armed now," and the Governor smiled.

Then he continued:

"As we both know each other, señor, I trust we can come to terms. As indifferent as you appear, you love life?"

"Yes, señor."

"Then you can go forth from this cell in perfect freedom, if you accept the terms I offer."

"Name your terms, Governor Cosala."

"You have with you the diamond ring, necklace, ruby anchor, and the jeweled dirk, which I saw the night we played at the Palace of Fortune?"

"I have not; I had with me some gold when I came to visit your castle, dear Governor; and one of your hirelings robbed me of it—now I have nothing."

"Upon your honor, señor?"

"Upon my honor!"

Governor Felipe Cosala turned away with a muttered curse, and started to pace across the cell; but he stumbled over the skull and fell heavily.

Ere he could rise, Merle's iron gripe was upon his throat.

The courtly villain who was Governor of the Castle of San Juan de Uloa, would have fared badly in the iron clutch of Merle, had not Lamas, the jailer, just then appeared in the doorway, to say that a lady awaited to see the Commandant, upon urgent business.

At a glance he saw the tall form of the Governor upon the stone floor, and the prisoner's hands upon his throat, and, with a yell back to the Captain of the Guard at the end of the passageway, he rushed to the aid of Don Felipe.

To loosen Merle's grasp was no easy matter, and the Governor was black in the face before he found himself freed from his danger.

Those in attendance expected the order to slay the prisoner then and there, as Merle said, calmly:

"Fools! If you had not been in such haste, I would have given the castle another Governor, and rid Mexico of this curse."

Stroking his throat quietly, and seating himself upon the stool, out of reach of his danger-

ons prisoner, Governor Felipe Cosala, without any reference to what had just happened, said:

"Return to the end of the corridor and await me. Tell the lady I will soon be with her."

"Now, *senor*, you said you had not the jewels with you—jewels that would tempt an anchorite, let alone a poor sinful mortal such as I am."

"Well, then, I will banish these from my mind, and discuss matters of far more value. Your father was wrecked somewhere on the Mexican coast when coming here?"

"Such was the case, Governor Cosala."

"His vessel was laden down with treasure, I suppose you know?"

"So I have been informed, Governor."

"This treasure was not lost when the vessel was wrecked?" inquiringly asked the Governor.

Merle raised his eyes, as though in surprise, but made no reply.

"Was it lost, *senor*?"

"It was not lost, Don Felipe, when the vessel was wrecked."

"You were with your father at the time of his death?"

"I was, *senor*."

"He made known to you about this treasure, *Senor Merle*?"

"He did, Governor Felipe Cosala."

"And you know where it is hidden, *Senor Merle*?"

"Why do you ask, *Senor Governor*?"

"Because upon that knowledge hangs your life," savagely said Don Felipe.

"Your terms are then—"

"Go with me to where that treasure is buried—go alone with me, if you desire, and when there take your share in diamonds and other precious stones—you can easily carry an imperial fortune in gems—and leave me the balance, and you shall go free. I swear it, by the Virgin, *senor*."

"Your word, Governor Cosala, is as good as your oath," sneered Merle.

"What can I do to prove then that I tell you the truth? You can go free as soon as I know where the treasure is," and Governor Cosala spoke earnestly.

"*La mentira tiene las piernas cortas, senor*," (a lie has short legs), suggested the prisoner.

"But I tell you no lie, *Senor Merle*. If I gain millions through you, I can easily afford to let you go free."

"You would be grasping and wish my share, too, and my life would be the forfeit."

"No, I offer to go with you alone. *Caramba!* You have a hand of iron, and strong as I am you find me but a child in your arms," said the Governor, with a shudder, as he remembered how near death he had been a few minutes since.

Merle smiled, and replied:

"No strength, *senor*, is proof against a stab in the back, or poison."

"I am no assassin," roared the angry man.

"It is just what you are—the assassin of women. Your memory is treacherous, *amigo*."

"We will now discuss the future—it interests you most. Do you accept my terms?" gruffly said the ruler.

"If I refuse?"

"Then you shall die here in this tomb—you see what it is—you see what companionship you will have," and the speaker pointed grimly to the skull.

"Ah, that one is nothing. There are a dozen of those under my luxurious couch here," and Merle drew aside the bench.

In spite of his wonderful nerve Don Felipe shuddered, and again there was admiration in his glance, as he turned it upon the fearless youth before him.

"You have no fear, *Senor Merle*?"

"Not of the dead, certainly; they are quiet comrades enough; the living are to be dreaded—the 'flesh and the devil,' not the bones. See, in the ten days I have been in here, this poor fellow and myself have become friends," and Merle raised the skull in his hands, while he continued, calmly:

"I look into his bony face and sightless eye-sockets, and can read there the misery he has known. After I know him well, I will make the more intimate acquaintance of these wretches. If my bones are to mingle with theirs, I wish to be friendly with them."

"Good God! you will refuse my offer, then?" and Felipe Cosala trembled; was he to lose the treasure he craved, through the stubbornness of this fearless prisoner?

"I can never tell you, *senor*, where my father's treasure is hidden."

"I will give you one month to consider that refusal—then, you may come to terms."

"We shall see, Governor mine. What, going so soon? I really found you entertaining."

With an oath, which no pious pen need care to chronicle, Governor Felipe Cosala left the dungeon, and a moment after Lamas turned the key in the huge lock, and Merle was again alone with his skeletons.

Rapidly the Governor retraced his way to his own quarters, passing through his *cabinet de toilette*, to arrange his ruffled linen, and brush the damp of the cell from his clothes after his fall and choking.

Then he entered the reception-room, and a woman advanced to meet him—a woman of splendid form and elegantly dressed, but with her face hidden by a veil.

"Be seated, lady, and announce how Don Felipe can serve you," said the Governor.

The woman came close to him, and threw back her veil.

"*Juanita!*"

"Ay, Felipe Cosala, I am Juanita Corrientes, whom you once professed to love, and whose brother you killed, because he made known to that Persian girl who and what you were. I did not believe what he said of you then, but now I know all was true, and I am revengeful, Felipe."

"Your brother should never have crossed my path as he did, and you are a fool, Juanita, to wait long years, and then come here prating about revenge."

"Felipe Cosala, for all the exalted rank you hold, you are a very devil, and the world will one day know you as I do; but it is never too late to avenge, and you shall feel that I am not a weak woman."

"In the years that have passed I have been in a convent, praying against my evil passions; but, by day and by night, in my nun's cell, I have been burning with vengeance against you, and my prayers turned to curses upon my lips, when I saw my brother in his grave, and knew that your hand placed him there. Felipe Cosala, I turned my back upon that sacred retreat, and I came to seek you."

The woman was almost weirdly beautiful, and her eyes were like globes of fire while her face was as white and smooth as marble.

As she spoke she suddenly drew from her bosom a long and narrow poniard, and drove it with terrible force for a woman's arm, straight at the heart of Felipe Cosala.

The dark, handsome face of the Governor never changed an expression, and he did not move from his tracks; but from his lips burst a scornful laugh, as the brittle steel shivered against a shirt of mail he wore beneath his outer attire.

"Juanita, sit down and don't be angry," he laughed.

The words were hardly from his lips, when the maddened woman drew from the folds of her dress a small silver-mounted pistol, and fired full in his face.

Don Felipe staggered back, and, as a stream of blood spouted from his temple, a ringing laugh of demoniacal joy burst from the woman's lips.

"Ha! ha! ha! Don Felipe, devil though you be, you are not invulnerable."

But, Governor Cosala had a third time within the hour, escaped death. The bullet had merely cut the flesh, and as the sentinel at his door, and the servants in waiting, rushed into the room, alarmed by the shot, he said, calmly, as though giving an ordinary order:

"Seize that woman, and send chief surgeon Mejia here."

The order was obeyed, and Juanita Corrientes, crushed at her failure to take the life of the man she now hated, as passionately as she had once loved him, submitted to be bound by the servants, the Governor looking on with apparent indifference.

"*Senor Mejia*, see that this woman is taken to the city mad-house and confined there for life, in a cell with other howling maniacs—do you hear?" said Don Felipe, as the surgeon entered.

"I do, *Excellenza*."

Juanita Corrientes sprung to her feet, a blaze in her eyes.

"Felipe Cosala, how dare you do me this wrong?"

"Bear her away—she is mad!" was the indifferent reply.

"Oh, God! I am not mad! I am not mad! If I go mad, as the companion of wild lunatics, it will be your hand, Felipe Cosala, that has made me so."

The Governor waved his hand, and the unfortunate woman was dragged away, and, an hour after, was the inmate of a mad-house. She had sought revenge and had lost her reason, for her brain had gone mad!

CHAPTER X.

THE CORNER-STONE OF FREEDOM.

WHEN Governor Felipe Cosala departed from Merle's cell, he doubtless believed that he left the prisoner crushed by the thought of remaining there one long and dreary month.

But he was mistaken, for Merle was not one to be easily crushed, and no sooner had the footsteps died away than he made up his mind to act.

"It looks hopeless," he muttered, "to think of escaping from here; but I have ample time for work, and I need only give up trying when it is impossible to do more."

"Let me see! I am in the basement of the water front of the castle, and in the side toward Vera Cruz; the foundations doubtless go down into the earth some twenty or thirty feet below me, and if I dig beneath them, I can lay my course and tunnel toward a point that should bring me outside of the castle walls."

"It will take me years of hard labor; but it is better than remaining here idle, and here I must surely die, for I know not where that treasure is; if I did I would gladly give it up, for there is a stain upon my name I must clear."

"And poor Mildred! what does she think of me?"

"All believe me dead ere this, or will, when Ainslie returns in the yacht; but those papers will clear my name, and I will have my revenge upon Wilber Sebastian, for to him do I owe all my misery."

"Had I those jewels, I believe I could buy my freedom with them; but what little I have besides, and all Captain Grenville is worth, would be no temptation to Felipe Cosala to release me. Now, to work."

Carefully Merle searched his cell, and his eyes, accustomed to the darkness, could penetrate into the furthest corner.

"It is a stone floor; each stone is a heavy block, fully three hundred pounds in weight, I judge, and the crevice between them is hardly half an inch; but one of these stones must be raised from its place; but how?"

The poor prisoner saw that a giant's fingers could never raise one of those heavy slabs, and he gave up the idea of effecting his object by strength.

"Ah! I have plenty of tools here—at least my knife will soon make them such," and he took up the bones at his feet.

Quietly taking out his knife, which had a number of heavy blades, he began to work to make the implements to aid his escape.

"Bless these poor fellows; it was good of them to die here, and leave me to inherit their bones. I will not squander my inheritance," he said, grimly.

And thus the poor prisoner worked on by day and night, for his deft fingers, by practice, soon became as expert in the darkness as in the light.

Thus he worked on, carving the numerous ribs, arms and leg-bones into knives, levers, and picks, while the skulls were made into shovels.

And so interested did he become in his work, so in earnest with the determination to husband his strength and escape, that he grumbled at old Lamas for not bringing him more food, and the better to conceal his occupation, he grew so violent toward the jailer, that at last his daily allowance of provisions was handed to him through a trap in the door, the old keeper not daring to enter, for Merle's chains permitted him to reach with his hands every part of his cell.

One day he heard heavy footsteps approaching, and quickly concealed his work, for he felt that he was to have a visitor.

It was as he had expected; Don Felipe appeared at the door, but did not enter; the jailer had warned him that it would be dangerous, as the prisoner was violent in his actions.

"I have come for your answer; do you accept my terms, *senor*?"

The Governor spoke shortly; he evidently cared not to linger in conversation.

"Upon my honor, Governor Cosala, I know not where that treasure was hidden."

"You lie in your false throat; you know, but you have not suffered enough to make you tell, and I shall leave you again."

"I suppose your cruel heart will deny me books and a lamp?" said Merle.

"Nothing, except the food you eat; as I see your face through this opening, it appears to me you look exceedingly well for a man thus confined."

"Your imagination, dear Governor; come into my dungeon and see how emaciated I am."

But the Governor was not to be lured within reach of those arms; he had petted his throat ever since the choking Merle had given him.

"*Senor*, when one year has passed from this day, I will visit you again; then, if you do not make known to me where lies that treasure, I will leave you to rot here for one year longer. Better tell me now, and gain freedom and wealth."

"Impossible, Governor; I do not know."

"*Caramba! Lamas!*"

"*Senor Excellenza*," and the jailer came at the Governor's call.

"For one year, until my next visit, this dungeon door is to remain closed; this trap in the door must serve all purposes for food and attention to the prisoner; here, I will take the key."

"*Si, Excellenza*," and Lamas detached the key from his chain and handed it to Don Felipe, who without another word walked away.

"Now I have ample time for work, for I need look for no mercy from that man."

"One year! oh, God! it seems a century to me here; but courage, my heart! The day will yet dawn."

So saying, Merle set himself again to work.

"As I am to be left undisturbed now, I may as well free myself of my irons—if I can; ha! I had forgotten the sharp edge of the iron door! It is a tedious work, but a drop of water will wear away a stone, it is said," and Merle drew his stool close to the portal, and raising one ankle, began to rub it against a steel border that

edged the iron door—a herculean task to accomplish his ends, but one that he had ample time to experiment on.

When at last, worn out with his arduous exercise, Merle threw himself down to sleep, he grimly smiled, as in twelve hours' work he had only succeeded in wearing the iron anklet smooth.

But day and night he continued his work, and after three long months the iron dropped from his right ankle.

Then followed three more months of weary work, and Merle was free of his chains; but he arranged them so that they could be fastened on at an instant's notice.

Half the year gone, and another month to follow in completing his tools. Then he breathed freely, and his heart throbbed with joy.

"This is the beginning of the end," he muttered.

"Now if Felipe Cosala enters this cell, I have at least the power to kill him, ere help can aid him; then death will quickly follow for me, but it is preferable to this life in a tomb—alive, yet buried."

But Governor Felipe Cosala did not enter the dungeon when the year rolled round.

Prompt to the day he appeared at the little trap in the iron door.

"Well, señor, are you yet alive?"

"Yes, and in good health; I die hard, Felipe Cosala."

"So it seems; but you must be a mere skeleton."

"Seeing is believing, Don Felipe."

But the Governor did not bite at the bait thrown out at him.

"You still refuse your freedom, señor?"

"I can make no other answer than I have before, Don Felipe."

"Fool! you like gold better than your life, to hang on thus; but I will conquer yet. If you have an iron endurance, I have an iron will; but to-day I will be merciful, as to-night I will be married—thanks to you, for my intended wife is the widow of the late Governor Guarena; you did me a good turn, señor, when you ran him through, and I shall send you a feast from the wedding-table. In nothing shall I stint you, for, if in one year from to-day, you do not yield, I will wall this cell up and make it your tomb, as another Governor, thinking I may have been cruel, might release you."

"You do not anticipate being Governor more than one year longer, then?" asked Merle, with apparent indifference.

"No, the *Junta* will have no members then, many of the old ones going out, and I may not be able to wield them to my wishes; hence I will resign ere I am deposed. You see I am honest with you?"

"Very, Señor Governor," dryly said Merle.

"But my abdication will not benefit you, señor, for I swear to you, as I before said, if you do not make known where that treasure lies, one year from to-day I will wall you in here alive."

Without another word Governor Cosala walked away, and Merle stood in silent and deep meditation.

One mere year and he knew he would be indeed walled up in that dungeon, which even then was a tomb.

So painful were his thoughts that he took no count of time, and hours passed away.

Then again came the sound of footsteps, and of more than one person. The next instant the iron trap was lowered, and a lamp shoved into the opening.

"Now, señor, take these provisions in. They are sent with the compliments of the happy bridegroom, his *Excellenza* Governor Felipe Cosala," said old Lamas.

Merle willingly obeyed, dragging into the opening and placing on his table fruits and confections, roast fowl, cakes and two bottles—one of Mexican wine, the other of liquor.

The plate of cake was set upon the dish of fowl, and beneath it, the quick eye of Merle caught sight of a knife and fork, that had evidently been left there by the carver.

"This is an oversight, but a good one for me. This liquor is invaluable in case of sickness, but the wine I will enjoy, as the bottle will be useful as a scraper, when my skulls wear out," he muttered, as he scraped the delicacies off of the dishes to his table.

Then he passed the plates back, and said to the waiting servant:

"Present my compliments to his *Excellenza*, Governor Felipe Cosala, and say that I drink to the happiness of his unfortunate bride."

"Si, señor," answered the servant; but he made the mental reservation to bear the message without the word *unfortunate*.

Old Lamas then quickly closed the iron trap, for he had been disturbed in his own feast by the coming of the servant, and Merle sat down to his supper in the darkness, for he now was able to see quite distinctly, so accustomed had his eyes become to the constant gloom of his cell, with impenetrable blackness by night, and only the shadow of light by day.

"One year—then certain death, unless I have found a way to escape."

"But I do not despair, for I have this very day raised the corner-stone of my freedom."

As Merle spoke he walked to the corner of his cell and his words were explained—after long months of tedious labor, he had raised from its place one of the large slabs that formed the flooring of the dismal dungeon! Beneath that was comparatively soft earth.

CHAPTER XI. A VOW KEPT.

WHEN Governor Cosala told Merle that he dreaded a reaction in the Mexican *Junta* that would, officially, take off his head, he told the truth, for the masses of the people felt that, so to speak, "there was something rotten in Denmark."

Ever quick to enter into revolution, or to draw the sword, Mexicans are yet slow to act unless some great excitement will follow, and they therefore let time settle the matter of their prominent leaders being ruled by a professional gambler.

But, though Señor Jose Rozales had left the assembly-room in amazement and disgust, at the result of the vote cast by the *Junta*, he at once went to work to remedy the evil, and the result of his labors, and of other honest members, was the decision in the council that Governor Felipe Cosala should be deprived of his office.

But, ere this determination of the *Junta* could be made known to him, the resignation of that individual was sent in, with the request that, as he had faithfully discharged his duties, in the two years he had commanded at the castle, his decision not longer to serve should be immediately accepted by that august body that had given him his commission.

The Señor Jose Rozales raved and swore in choice Spanish and many of his colleagues followed suit; they had hoped to disgrace the haughty and irrepressible gambler; but he had outgeneraled them, and nothing was left for them to do but accept his resignation, with orders to turn over his command and the keys of the castle to General Bravo, a gallant soldier of no little renown.

Anticipating what would follow after new members had been called to the *Junta*, Don Felipe had been quietly making his preparations to leave Mexico and carry with him his beautiful wife, whose vast wealth he now held control of, and which he had been secretly transferring to the United States.

But he was determined to make one more effort to force from Merle the secret hiding-place of the treasure of Freelance, for he felt assured that the youth had deceived him in declaring his ignorance of it.

The day before his command was to end he therefore wended his way to the dismal dungeon, and Merle was again called to look through the trap, for the Governor would not venture into the cell.

As the prisoner glanced into the face of his persecutor, strong as he was in nerve, Don Felipe started back, for he beheld a face of marble whiteness, with immense eyes that looked like liquid fire, and the cheeks and chin covered with beard, while the mouth was hidden beneath a heavy mustache.

Long black hair fell upon each side of the prisoner's face, and the change that two years had made was startling indeed.

"Maldito! who are you!" cried the Governor, in a tone that slightly trembled.

"Merle Freelance, Don Felipe. My appearance startles you?"

"It does; you have changed wonderfully."

"Do you wonder at it—caged up in this hole as I have been?"

"You have but to say the word to leave here forever."

"I cannot say it, Don Felipe."

"Then you are doomed. Lamas!"

"Señor *Excellenza*."

"Where are those workmen?"

"Here, *Excellenza*."

As he spoke Lamas beckoned to three men, who approached, trowels in hand.

"Señor Merle, these men have come to bury you alive."

"So be it, Don Felipe; I will never ask my life at your hands."

"Señor, you are a fool."

"Better be a fool than a coward such as you are, Governor Cosala."

Don Felipe did not like to measure words with Merle, for he knew well his quick wit and ready satire, and he said, angrily:

"To your work, men."

Then, from barrows in the passageway, large stones, and mortar, were brought, and the three men set to work.

The cell in which Merle was confined was at the end of the passage, just around a corner, and off by itself, so that the wall could be run up across the narrow tunnel, for it was nothing more, that served as a hallway, and the dungeon be entirely cut off, leaving no sign of the black hall beyond, in which so many poor creatures had already met their death.

The men set nimbly to work, old Lamas holding two lamps for them, and Merle watching their every movement from the narrow opening

in the iron door, for they were within four feet of him.

With folded arms and a diabolical expression upon his dark face, Don Felipe watched the workmen, until the wall was four feet high.

"Now, señor, you see I am in deadly earnest!"

"You always have been, Don Felipe," was the cool reply.

"In three hours more you will be shut out from the earth, and that dungeon will be your tomb."

"To-morrow the new Governor comes in possession of the castle, but you need expect no mercy from him, for he will not know you are here."

"He will be a poor Governor if he does not acquaint himself with the secrets of his cells," quietly returned Merle.

"He doubtless will do so; but there will be no cell here."

"I judge not, from the way your hirelings have obeyed your bidding the past hour."

"*Caramba!*" and Don Felipe took a few steps up the corridor and back.

"These men will wall you out of the world, señor. For not remembering anything about it I pay them a very handsome sum; while old Lamas, here, who will turn over his keys to a new jailer, will tell him that the sea beat in this end of the corridor and the Governor Cosala had it walled up on that account—gold buys the old man's tongue, señor."

"You see now there is no hope for you—unless you tell me that which I would know."

Governor Cosala spoke the last words slowly and with perfectly distinct utterance; but Merle's reply came quickly:

"Go on with your work, Felipe Cosala; the wall will shut out sight of you and the sound of your voice."

"You will die of starvation."

"So be it."

"Inch by inch you will die; shrieking for food, but with no ears to hear your cries, and in your own agony gnaw your own flesh from your bones."

"You draw a hungry picture, señor."

"You will go mad, and endure the torments of hell ere death comes to your relief."

"When death does come, Felipe Cosala, I will meet it as I have lived—without fear; but, ah! if I had you within reach of my own right arm, the prayers of angels would not stay my hand until I was revenged on you."

"You can kill me, fiend that you are, but you cannot break my heart."

Merle turned away from the door of his dungeon, and the workmen, at a stern order from the cruel Governor, went on building the solid wall, that was to bury a human being from all hope of life.

The clink of the trowels, the low voices of the workmen grew each moment fainter and fainter, and soon no sound was heard; the silence of death reigned in the dungeon.

Then Merle arose and approached the opening in the iron door, and gazed forth with his staring eyes into the darkness.

A moment he looked before him, and then from his inmost soul seemed to come the words:

"I am walled in; Felipe Cosala has kept his vow."

CHAPTER XII. RETRIBUTION.

HAD Don Felipe Cosala, with his usual caution, thought it necessary to examine the dungeon in which his prisoner was consigned to death, a strange sight would have met his astonished gaze; but, feeling that there was not the shadow of a chance for even a bird to escape from that cell, he had not had an idea of glancing into the dungeon, and he walked away from the spot with the joyous feeling that he had fearfully avenged himself upon the prisoner, even though he had lost his treasure.

But, as the old Spanish proverb says:

"*La gente pone y Dios dispone*," (Men propose, but God doth dispose), so it was in the case of Merle, for Don Felipe, had he searched the dungeon, would have found that it had greatly changed.

The walls seemed coming together to crush the unfortunate prisoner, for the dungeon had greatly decreased in size.

The secret of this decrease was that soft earth had been packed up against the stone walls all around, extending out a distance of two feet, and reaching to the ceiling, and so securely and tightly compressed in place as to look like the wall itself.

Then, beneath the table, firm and solid, was a mass of earth, and under the broad bench, that served as a couch, the space was also filled up with dirt.

The secret of all this, was, that a very deep hole was in one corner of the dungeon, from whence the earth had been taken, and during the last year of his confinement Merle had worked fifteen hours out of twenty-four for freedom, but always in his cell at the hour old Lamas made it a rule to come with his meals.

Since he had undertaken the work, Merle had found it more gigantic than he had at first supposed it to be, but he was a man of indomitable will, and had never hesitated after he had com-

menced, and constantly upheld by the hope that he would meet with success; though there was a dread in his heart that he would fill his dungeon with fresh earth before he could tunnel through to the outer world.

The day before Don Felipe had paid him his last visit, Merle had made a discovery, and a most important one for him, and he had watched the walling up of the dungeon with comparative indifference.

When the last stone had been set in the death-wall, and the last trowelful of mortar added to smooth it off, Merle had waited to see if it was really the intention of Don Felipe to let him die there; but when he knew that another day had come, by the light from the narrow window, he felt that the cruel Governor had indeed condemned him to death.

Having come to this conclusion he moved about his cell collecting his hideous tools, wrapped them in his tattered blanket, and then, with another bundle, the bread he had saved from day to day, he let himself down into the deep cavity which his patience and energy had made.

The rope by which he descended was made from the ticking of his moss mattress, and it was twisted and braided so that it easily held his weight.

For twenty feet he descended, hand-under-hand, before he came to the bottom, and then, dragging his bundles upon his back, he stooped down upon his hands and knees and pushed forward into the tunnel he had dug through the weary hours of the past year.

For fully fifty feet he went along, gradually ascending, until daylight shone ahead of him.

Brighter and brighter grew the dark tunnel, until he suddenly arose to a standing position and glanced around him.

This was the discovery he had made the day before—the earth and stone had suddenly crumbled in upon him, and for a moment he had believed he was crushed beneath a heavy wall; but with a superhuman effort he raised himself from beneath the debris, and found that he had penetrated into a large cell, or chamber, the weight of the stone flooring breaking through the crust of earth above him.

The place was evidently a store-room, for it was filled with boxes, barrels and jars of provisions, to the infinite delight of the poor half-starved man.

For a moment, as he straightened himself up among the barrels, that had also sunk in upon him, he felt himself reel with weakness, for he believed he had but little more to do to escape, but he recovered control of himself by a mighty effort, and set to work hastily to hide the hole he had made and to arrange the barrels and boxes over it in such a way that any one coming into the place would not suspect what had occurred.

As soon as he had done this, he retraced his way to his cell to await the coming day, which his tally on the leg of his table told him would be the one of Don Felipe's promised visit.

The reader has seen the result of that visit, and how Merle deserted his loathsome dungeon as soon as he dare do so, and sought the cell he had discovered so opportunely by accident.

As he entered it for the second time, as on the first occasion, he was nearly blinded by the light—for there were two windows, if long narrow openings in the wall could be called such—so long had he lived in almost midnight darkness.

There was an iron door in one end of the cell opposite the windows, and upon the two other sides were shelves, filled with boxes.

Beneath the windows, and extending some ten feet from the wall, were the barrels and boxes, piled one on the other, that had so nearly crushed the poor prisoner, but which his giant strength had enabled him to rise up under, for his constant and arduous work had given him muscles of iron.

The second time he entered his *Eldorado*, Merle quickly arranged a secure hiding-place in a large empty box, and therein deposited his grim working implements, which he had ingeniously made from the human bones, into long sharp knives, and the skulls into scoops.

With these skeleton tools he had dug out wagon-loads of earth, and had tunneled fully a hundred feet.

The broken wine-bottle, to be used as a scraper or scoop, when the skulls wore out, the bottle of liquor still intact, a bundle of fresh tools, the knife he had found on the dish, the day of Don Felipe's wedding, his coat, much the worse for wear, rope of ticking, ragged blanket, and bundle of stale bread comprised his household furniture, while his wardrobe consisted of a pair of pants, worn off to the knee, and a belt around his waist in which was stuck a knife—a knife of human bone, that of an arm, but carved into almost razor sharpness, and with a point as small as a needle.

This was a weapon he had devoted much time in making; it was not to be used in digging out earth, but had been made for a deadly purpose—to drive into the heart of Don Felipe Cosala, had he ever honored the dungeon with his presence again.

Fortunate was it for the castle's Governor that his lucky star kept him out of the cell.

"This is an old store-room, not used now, for the crackers are stale and the salt meat almost unfit to eat; but it is best for me that it is unfrequented, for I will not be disturbed, and no food will I refuse now.

"Let me see what scene these windows overlook," and Merle climbed upon the boxes until he could see through one of the narrow openings.

"Yes, I am just above the highest water-mark—that accounts for the desertion of this store-room—it was too damp. Well, I won't complain; it is dry enough for me.

Descending from his point of observation, Merle sat down to think how he should continue his effort to escape.

Suddenly he started, for a grating sound came at the door, as a key entered the lock.

In dismay Merle sprang to his feet—he had no time to fly to his place of refuge among the boxes, and so bounded behind the door and crouched down, his right hand clutching his bone knife, his eyes glaring like a wild beast at bay.

Slowly the massive door swung on its rusty hinges, and a tall form entered.

It was Lamas—the old jailer. Without seeing Merle he crossed the room, took a small box from a shelf, and poured the contents out on the stone floor.

It was a mass of gold, several watches, chains, a few precious stones, and rings—the booty of years which he had plundered from his unfortunate prisoners.

"Ha! ha! Now, old man, you are rich at last, and you can leave this old pile of rocks where you have been little better than a prisoner yourself for thirty long years, and heard groans, curses and prayers enough to drive you mad.

"Ha! ha! it is all over now, and another stands in your shoes.

"Thirty years accumulating a fortune, and the Governor gave me nearly as much gold yesterday, for the lie I told about the dungeon being walled up, as I have made in all that time.

"Well, I must hide this treasure now about me some way, and leave this accursed place forever.

"Ha! ha!" and again speaking of himself in the third person, he continued:

"What a gay old fellow you will make, with this money to spend! Better go to the United States, in case some of these old Mexican walls have ears, and might find tongues. Ha! ha! old Lamas, you old rogue, life now opens before you."

"You mistake, old man; life now ends for you!"

The deep voice, coming as though from the depths of a vault, caused the old Mexican to drop down in terror, covering his treasure with his hands.

"No, no, you shall not take my gold from me—my hard-earned gold; you shall not have it, I say!"

"No, no, man, or devil, whichever you be, I will have your blood."

Like lightning the old man wheeled toward Merle, and with bony fingers outstretched rushed upon him, a cry of fury on his lips.

"Who are you? Man or devil, who are you that have come here to rob me of my gold?" and he paused, confronting Merle, and gazed upon him with savage, searching eyes.

For two years he had not seen his prisoner, and he failed to recognize the being he saw before him; the splendidly-dressed, handsome youth he had turned into the death dungeon had been cruelly metamorphosed into a cadaverous, hollow-eyed, marble-faced man, with long, matted hair and beard, and body half nude and dirt-stained.

"I want not your gold, old man, but your life. A saint's life should not now stand between me and freedom," said Merle, in his stern, deep tones.

"Never! never my gold shall you have. It is not my life, but my gold you want; but I will kill you first," cried the old miser and gold-mad man, and he rushed upon Merle, as if to tear him with his teeth and nails.

As before said, he was almost a giant in size, and he felt that he could crush his enemy, and like a wild beast he sprang upon him.

Merle rose to meet the attack, and the two men clenched and fell heavily upon the stone floor.

Then one arose to his feet, a grim smile upon his face.

That one was Merle, and in his hand he held his hideous blade, and it was stained with the life-blood of Lamas, the jailer.

CHAPTER XIII.

METAMORPHOSED.

FOR some moments Merle stood silently looking down upon the cruel jailer, upon whom a terrible retribution had come as he stood upon the very threshold of a new existence.

An hour before he had turned over his keys

to another jailer, appointed by the new Governor, and had told him that the lately-built wall ended the tier of water cells.

Then he had gone to the deserted store-room, where for years he had hoarded his ill-gotten treasure—gone to meet his death.

Like a very thief he had slipped into the vacant cell, watching his chance that no one should see him, and there he had met his doom.

The gold and trinkets, of which he had robbed his prisoners, lay still on the stone *pave*, and Merle stooped over and gathered all up, saying, quietly:

"These riches may pay my way out of here; a good deal of the gold is mine anyhow, and much more was paid him by Felipe Cosala, *upon my life*; my conscience will not trouble me for taking it.

"I dislike to shed blood; but the old man's destiny led him to fall by my hand. Now to see where I am."

Merle stepped to the iron door and cautiously opened it. The key was still in the heavy lock, and, by a window in the ceiling, it was seen that the storeroom opened into a long corridor, with doors upon either side.

At the further end of the passage was a heavy door of iron; but there was no appearance of present occupation.

"This tier of cells is deserted for some reason; perhaps there are not enough prisoners on hand to fill them; and strange, too, where Felipe Cosala has been Governor for two years!"

"Well, so much the better for me. I will reconnoiter further."

So saying Merle stole from the store-room, and, step by step, crept along the corridor toward the further end, his ears alert for the slightest sound, and his bone blade in hand.

Suddenly he stopped. Voices reached his ear, and they came from the first room on the left, nearest the iron door that opened from the corridor.

Nearer and nearer he approached, until he saw that the door of the cell was ajar and the key stood in the lock.

Crouching down close to the door, Merle determined to play eavesdropper, for he felt that his critical position would excuse any act which, under other circumstances, his feelings would revolt against.

A moment he listened and then he discovered that there were not two voices in conversation, as he had believed at first, but one person talking aloud.

What could it mean?

He was now confident that the entire tier of cells was deserted, and yet here was one door ajar, and some one within.

His hearing, rendered most sensitive by the long silence that had brooded around him in his dungeon, caught the words:

"I do not know what to do, for if I report him dead they will discover that he is not the man that was assigned to the dark cell—nay, worse, they will see that it is the man whom I reported as having died in his dungeon five years ago, when instead I moved him to this deserted tier and buried another prisoner in his place."

"If it were known, I would lose my life, that is certain; but then, I could not see Don Morales die here; he had been too kind to me and mine in years gone by, and if he did plot against the Government, it might not have been a crime."

"When I brought him here I thought 'twas to save his life, as in time he could have worked his way out; but alas! his health was gone, and here he lies, poor fellow, dead in prison."

"Now I must bring him here, and thus ends the career of the poor Don Morales—died in a dungeon, and the Castle de Uloa his monument."

"Bless me! how glad I am that old Lamas has gone. He watched me like a hawk, and several times, when seeing me come from this deserted tier, has asked me what I wanted here?"

"Well, he has gone, now, and the new Governor has given me this whole wing of the castle over which to be chief jailer. Now I will try and solve the mystery of that leaking corridor, that, Lamas says, the Governor Cosala had walled up because it leaks."

"Strange the sea should beat in there, when only at highest tide, and in easterly gales, do the waves even dash that high. Some poor devil has been walled in to die, by that accursed old Lamas and the Governor Cosala."

"Senor, you speak the truth!"

As the deep voice fell on his ears the man turned in dismay, his face as white as a grave-cloth—his form trembling violently.

He was a man of fifty years of age, with iron-gray hair and beard—of small stature, yet wiry, and a face that was stern and determined, yet held a kindly look in the eyes.

He was dressed in the castle uniform, and his leathern belt and rows of keys proved him to be a head jailer.

His words, as he ran on garrulously to himself, for he had believed no living being anywhere near him, had told that he had a secret, and one that would cost him his life if known. He had befriended one who had served him in the past, and who had been brought to a dun-

geon to die; he had reported him dead, in place of another prisoner who had died, and then had brought him to the deserted tier where he then was.

The place in which he stood was not a cell. It had evidently been intended to be made such at some time, but it was an excavation in the rock and sand, and extended back many feet, while it was ten paces in width.

But it had been used as a cell for the unfortunate man who had died there, and who lay on a cot, by which the jailer now stood trembling.

There was a table by the side of the cot, and upon it a few bottles of medicine, some delicate food, a lamp and a few books. Evidently the dead prisoner had been as kindly cared for as the circumstances would allow.

And the prisoner?

A tall man, worn away to a skeleton, and with a face aristocratic and intelligent.

Merle remembered the name—Don Arenas Moralez, a conspirator, who had been imprisoned, years before.

All that there was to see, and which I have described, Merle took in at a hasty glance, and his decision was at once made, and advancing into the cavernous-looking chamber, he had spoken as he did.

"Who are you?" gasped the jailer.

"I have heard your words, senior jailer; I am he whom Felipe Cosala walled up in the water dungeon to die," was Merle's calm reply.

"A prisoner, then?"

"Yes, I am known as Number One of the Deep Sea Dungeons. I slew Governor Vistal Guarena in a duel, and I was seized and brought here to die."

"I have heard of you. It was you that drove a knife through the hand of Governor Cosala, when he was the Monte Prince."

"It was. My duel with Guarena was caused by that circumstance."

"But, in the name of the Virgin! how can you here?" suddenly cried the jailer.

"I will tell you. I am not a man to die tamely, without any effort for self-protection, and I was working my way under the castle, when I struck this deserted tier of cells—the old store room at the end of the corridor caving in upon me."

"Holy Jesu! You surprise me."

"I tell you the truth, for I fear not to trust you with my secret—as I hold yours."

The jailer turned white again but he answered:

"It is my duty, senior, to deliver you at once to the guard."

"Your duty, yes, but not your desire."

"I must do so, senior."

"Hold on, senior! You see before you a desperate and determined man, who would sacrifice a score, ay, a hundred lives to free himself from these walls. I have heard that you placed that poor man, Don Moralez, here to work his way out, and that he died ere he completed his task. So do not prate to me of your duty, for I would kill you, and then work my way to liberty as that dead man attempted."

"If ever you called a guard, and I was taken, I know your secret, and if I went back to a dungeon, you would go to your death."

"I have gold and jewels, many thousand pesos' worth; take them, and as Don Moralez took the place of another man, so metamorphose me into some one else."

"What say you, senior jailer?"

It was evident that Merle held the winning hand; but the jailer replied, doggedly:

"Were I to leave you here, it would take you years to work to the outer wall."

"So be it; I am content—unless you pass me out of the castle."

"Impossible!" almost shrieked the jailer. "Do you think I should have allowed that man to die here, if I could have aided him to escape?"

"Ah, no, no! It would be death to both of us to make the attempt."

"I am willing to risk it," was the calm reply.

"You know not what you ask, senior. If I ascend from here to the tier above, the guard examines me critically, and you would have a score of guards and a dozen officers to pass ere you reach the castle entrance. You know not the risk."

"So be it; I will remain here and work my way underground to the outer world—my board, I will pay in advance, and I expect you to furnish me the best you can," and Merle smiled as he spoke of his board.

"Will you accept of my terms, senior jailer?" asked Merle, as the man still hesitated.

"It is my only alternative. Here, in the cells of the castle, and with a thousand soldiers within call, an escaped prisoner dictates terms to a jailer; it is wonderful, senior."

"It is out of the usual routine, jailer, I admit; but it is nevertheless strangely true. Come, let me pay you, and—"

"And what, senior?"

"Show you your old friend, Lamas."

"Por Dios! senior, we are ruined! Lamas here?" and the man started back.

"Yes, but he is not dangerous. It seems that the old store-room was where he hid the treasures, of which he robbed the prisoners, I hav-

ing been one of his victims, and he came there awhile since to get his ill-gotten gold."

"Holy Mother! now I know what became of the key to this tier. I missed it long since, and was forced to have another made."

"Yes, he was an old thief, but I did not suppose he would steal iron as well as gold and jewels."

"Senior, he wanted a hiding-place for his gains; we jailers have our rooms regularly inspected you know; but, where is Lamas?"

"Come!" and Merle led the way to the store-room, shoved open the door, and the jailer started back.

"Dead!"

"Even so. He came here, and it was his life or mine. Here is the treasure he laid up on earth; you are his heir," and Merle handed the box of riches to the jailer, whose eyes flashed avariciously, for, like most of Adam's descendants, he was a worshiper of gold.

"Senior jailer, yonder is where I worked my way through. Some day you can have the flooring mended and lay the damage upon the rats."

"Now I will bear Lamas to the cell where we left Don Moralez, and I will bury the two bodies there, while you go after some little things to make me as comfortable as circumstances will permit."

"Then show me something of the geography of the castle, and how I am to work, and pledge yourself to bring me food whenever you can, and that is all I will ask. There, you have your pay; now let us to work."

The jailer made no effort to resist the iron will of Merle, and that night the poor prisoner slept more comfortably than he had for over two years, and in his heart was a great joy, for he was now hopeful that the end was near at hand.

If he had but known what lay before him, even his brave heart would have cowered from the work; but fortunately, the scales that conceal the future are never lifted from the eyes of us poor mortals, and hope, the heart's life-preserver, keeps us from sinking with despair.

CHAPTER XIV

FRANCISCO DOLORES SEES AN APPARITION.

I WILL now—with an author's secret keys that enable him to unlock iron doors, and penetrate the darkest dungeons—lead my reader to another cell, in that solid old pile of misery, the Castle San Juan de Uloa, or that was, at the time of which I write, the scene of many a devilish crime, and secret assassination, equal to the dark deeds of the Castle El Moro of Havana, the old Tower of London, the Bastille of France, and the rock-and-iron prisons of Madrid and Cadiz in old Spain and Lisbon, whose stone floors were dyed with innocent blood; ay, equaling in misery and red deeds the scenes enacted in the carcels of Rome, Naples and Venice in the olden time, and not forgotten now, and out-heroding the barbarities and cruelties of the Turk, the Algerine and the Moor.

In that other cell, at the end one of the tier above where Merle had been confined, sat a man, his head bowed in his hands, and his whole form trembling with some deep emotion that overpowered him.

His cell was a large one, fully fifteen feet square, and there were two narrow embrasures, one in the northern, the other in the eastern wall, to give light to the chamber.

Against the south wall was a cot, with a fairly comfortable mattress upon it, and several old scrapes for covering, while a table and a chair, besides the one upon which the prisoner was seated, constituted the furnishing of the cell.

For creature comforts there was an iron lamp, a number of books, and ink-horn and some quill pens, with a few dishes and a teapot.

If there were other articles of use they were not visible.

The man who sat, as though bowed down in grief, was bent with age, for fully seventy years had frosted his hair as white as snow, and it fell below his waist in thin, straggling locks, while his beard, also white, reached to the floor as he bent over.

He was attired in a cassock of coarse cloth, much worn, girdled by a belt of leather, and his feet were bare, while a rosary of gold beads hung from his girdle, and a crucifix of the same precious metal was suspended around his neck by a massive chain of silver.

Presently the head was raised and the face was revealed—a bold brow, black eyes, still bright and piercing, and the stamp of intellect upon it.

In a trembling voice he muttered, speaking in Italian, which he spoke as his mother-tongue:

"A causa persa, parole assai." (When the cause is lost there is enough of words.)

Then to his lips came an impatient ejaculation, and rising, with an effort, he crossed toward his cot and drew it from the wall.

"Too late! too late!" he murmured, as he bent down, and drew from the wall a piece of cloth, that displayed the massive stone carved out fully two feet square, and going back into the massive masonry fully six feet.

Within the aperture was a rope of threads, carefully coiled up, a small bag of buckskin, several stone-chisels, and a much-worn mallet, manufactured out of the round legs of his cot, which had been cut down in hight some six inches for the purpose of making these wooden hammers.

"Thirty long, heart-breaking years within these cruel walls, and placed here for a crime of which I am innocent as the babe unborn."

"Ay, thirty years of weary toil by day and night—of heart-yearnings to free myself of my fetters, and hunt the world over to tell him that I was not false to my trust—that the Deity so willed I was not to return to him, but come here to languish in prison."

"But they could not force my tongue to speak—to betray him who saved my life—him whom I loved as a brother."

"Oh, thou God that rulest on high, give me strength to go from here that I may find him!"

The old man dropped down on his knees with uplifted hands, and thus remained for a moment.

Then he stooped over and slowly crawled into the opening in the rocks, and tapped lightly with a chisel in front of him.

"A mere crust, not the sixteenth of an inch, now divides me from the bright sunshine without; but, alas! after thirty years of toil, cutting my way through this cruel wall, I have not the strength to fly—my poor old hands are too numb to hold the rope, my arms too weak to support my weight, and I would fall a hundred feet to the earth below."

"No, I must yet remain here, and in my cell I must die."

Slowly he crept back into his cell and again pushed his bed against the opening in the wall, and tottering with weakness sunk down upon it.

"Yes, here I must die—alone, uncared for—no, not wholly uncared for, as the jailer has been kind to me, and I will call down the blessing of the church upon his head. He has given me little comforts as he could, and, contrary to orders, has allowed me books to read, and a lamp. As he has been kind to those under him, so will God bless his life."

"I feel strangely sad to-night, and on the morrow, when good Pablo brings my food, I will give into his hands the papers I have written. I will give him the jewels I have as his own, if he will only pledge himself to seek him and give him my written story of my sufferings. If he is dead then shall he seek his son, for upon him will the inheritance fall—an imperial inheritance—a monarch's wealth."

"I feel that the boy yet lives, though I dread that the father is dead. His life was too dangerous to last long; but if both are dead then shall the church have the treasure, and worthy Pablo shall be made rich."

"Luckily, I have written all in those secret characters known to few, and which I taught the wee boy when he could first lisped words; he will recall them sufficiently to read my instructions and find the place, and if both be dead then Padre Fausto, to whom Pablo must bear them, will soon decipher the text."

"My old blood is stirred strangely to-night. No, no, hope has died in my heart; I dare not hope; but, oh! that I should lose now—now, after I have struggled with the perseverance of a Sybarite for thirty long years—struggled, to fail in the end with my hand upon the mane as I was about to mount to success."

"Oh, Felipe Cosala, to you I owe all this; but, how I have injured or wronged you I cannot tell. The curse of God upon you, Felipe Cosala, wherever you be."

The lips ceased their utterances, and as the sun, sinking beyond the horizon, cast a ray of gold into the cell, the old man's face brightened, and he stretched forth his arms appealingly as he lay upon his cot, and cried, in trembling tones:

"Oh, thou golden smile of sunlight, do not leave me here to die!"

"Darkness will follow your going—the darkness of death, and I pray you linger yet awhile to gladden my old eyes. Ha! what sound is that?"

With a strength, hardly to be expected in one so infirm, the old man arose to his feet and listened.

Then to his ears came the muffled sound of blows upon some soft substance.

"Strange! what can it mean? In all the years that I have been here no sound like that have I heard," and the prisoner endeavored to catch from whence the sound came, for that the blows were struck strangely near him he well knew.

"Pablo is never here at this hour; he comes but in the morning. Ha! can it be another poor wretch like me striking for his freedom?"

Chug! chug! chug!

The blows came steadily, rapidly, nearer and nearer.

"But that sound comes not from the wall—but whence?"

The old prisoner sunk down upon his knees, his form trembling, his head bent in the attitude of listening.

"It is! It must be some poor wretch work-

ing to fly from the cruel walls: but from whence comes he?

"Oh! that I could warn him that other ears may hear!"

Chug! chug! chug! chug!

Still the firm, rapid blows struck into some soft substance.

Nearer and nearer they sounded, and with a startled cry the old man staggered to his feet, and fell back upon his cot.

"They are blows for life and freedom! they were beneath my feet!"

"Strike on! strike on! Oh thou God-gaunted man! strike on! for life lies before thee!"

Overcome by his emotions the old man sunk back trembling, his eyes staring, his teeth chattering, and his long, claw-like fingers nervously twisting in and out his hoary beard.

Chug! clink! clink! chug!

The blows fell still strong, still rapidly, driven by some tireless hand, some bold brain, some fearless heart, and ever and anon the sound changed, as the digger's blade struck a stone or substance harder than the earth.

Harder and harder came the breath of the white-haired prisoner. He could not speak—he could but wait, tremble, hope.

Nearer and nearer came the blows, and the eyes, almost blinded by age, were now staring upon the gravel flooring of his cell, which constant treading upon had hardened almost into adamant.

Louder and louder, as the twilight deepened, and all below the narrow windows was cast in shadow.

Chug! chug! clink! clink! clink!

Then the flooring seemed falling in; then the flooring seemed rising to the ceiling; then, up from the center of the cell, arose a human form like an apparition, while the earth and gravel fell from his head and shoulders in showery masses.

A brave soul had cut through to life and freedom.

CHAPTER XV.

LIFE AND DEATH.

"God in heaven! am I still within stone walls?"

It was almost a cry of despair that burst from the lips of the apparition, who so suddenly appeared before the old man in his cell.

As he uttered the words he glanced searchingly around, and his eyes fell upon the cot and the form upon it.

Instantly he sprang from the hole in which he stood, to the solid flooring, and the two men gazed at each other—the one upon the brink of the grave—the hoar-frost of three score and ten years upon hair and beard; the other a man of six feet in height, slender, yet with muscles of steel, as his bared arms and breast displayed; a man half-dressed, earth-begrimed, and with matted masses of black hair hanging below his waist, and beard that would be brown, if free of the dirt-stains, for falling below his girdle of coarse leather, it had become bedraggled and clotted, as he had, on bended knees, tunneled his way to liberty.

His brown hands and feet were bare, and exceedingly small, his waist almost as slender as a woman's, and his shoulders broad and massive; in fact, he was a man of superb physique, and possessed a face as perfect as his form.

Every feature was regular, expressive, and stamped with determined resolution, while rows of even teeth, milk-white, glittered through his dark mustache.

But the most remarkable of all were his eyes, which seemed like molten diamonds, so intensely bright were they, and yet so full of passionate languor which the exceedingly long and dark eyelashes doubtless gave to them.

In spite of his semi-nudity, his dirt-begrimed face, hands and feet, his long and unkempt hair and beard, he was a splendid specimen of manhood, and the eyes of the gray-haired prisoner turned upon him with admiration undisguised.

"Who are you?" he asked, in his weak, trembling voice.

"I am one who has toiled fifteen long years to reach the light of day, old man, and will not let even your gray hairs stand between me and the end, if such be your humor."

The voice was a deep basso, yet strangely soft and musical in spite of the threat in the words.

"Fifteen years!" half the number that I have worked to reach the sunlight," sadly said the old man.

"Thirty years! *Por Dios!* have you been thirty years within these accursed walls?"

"I have, my son; and have found the day just as the night of death comes on."

"How mean you, old man?"

Rising, the prisoner drew aside his cot and pointed to the excavation in the stone wall.

"There is my work of thirty years—a few moments' toil, and you are free, my son."

The stranger stepped forward and glanced into the hewn opening, and said, earnestly:

"Your work has been as tedious as mine; we will reap the benefit this night."

"No, my son, I am soon to cross the threshold of another world. When I leave this cell it will be to confront my God."

"No, if you are weak I will carry you, for I

am a very giant in strength—my years of toil have done that much for me.

"Come, do not despair, for see, the darkness increases, and ere long we can escape beneath its shelter."

"You will go alone, my son, but I remain here; yet I would have you serve me—hold! let me light my lamp."

The old man soon struck a light by means of a flint, and touched the wick of his iron lamp.

Then he tottered back to his bed and the stranger stood near, the light falling full upon his muscle-knotted form.

Suddenly the old prisoner started backward, a cry upon his lips, while his eyes were staring at the left side of the man before him.

"Holy heaven! he bears that mark!"

"Speak! for the love of God, speak!" cried the old man, in ringing tones, while his fellow-prisoner gazed upon him as though he thought him mad.

"My poor old friend, my sudden coming upon you has been too much for your nerves—"

"No, no, no! it is that! you bear the mark of the Red Anchor over your heart! How came it there?"

It was the other prisoner's time to start now, and he glanced downward and his eyes fell upon that which held the gaze of the old man—a blood-red anchor and cable, tattooed into the flesh, just over his heart!

"What know you of this symbol, old man?"

"Everything! It is the custom in Persia to tattoo a symbol over the heart—the royal house of Fezzan have a Red Anchor for their symbol, but you are no Persian, my son?"

"My mother was a Persian princess," was the calm reply.

"Zulah Merle—Princess of Fezzan."

The effect of the reply upon the old prisoner was startling. He gasped for breath, tried to speak, and then endeavored to rise to his feet; but with a low moan sunk back upon the cot, insensible.

The other prisoner, in whom the reader has doubtless ere this recognized Merle the Mutineer, looked around the small cell for restoratives of some kind, but finding none, darted quickly into the opening from which he had emerged, and disappeared from sight.

For full fifteen minutes was he gone, and then he returned, a bottle in one hand, a jar of water in the other.

The old prisoner still lay unconscious, and Merle poured some liquor from the bottle into his mouth, and bathed his head and hands.

Soon the eyes opened and were fixed with a strange stare upon the face bending over him.

"And you are little Merle—the son of Freelance the Buccaneer?" he said, slowly.

"I am Merle, and my father was Freelance the Buccaneer," and he smiled at having been called little, while he added:

"And you? who are you?"

"Francisco Dolores—a Spanish priest, and your father's friend."

"Francisco Dolores! you within these walls?" and Merle dropped on his knees before the old priest, whose trembling hand fell upon his head.

"Yes, my son; I have been here for thirty years—ever since I came to Vera Cruz, at your noble father's bidding, to take you, a wee boy then, to his arms."

"I know you well—you were my father's trusted friend."

"Ay, and I had cause to be, my son. He saved me from an imprisonment more cruel than even this has been, for I was a slave to the Moors; but he carried me with him from the hated shadow of those Amazerg hills, and until thirty years ago I never left him—ay, I married him to your mother, boy—to your beautiful mother, who died that night of storm, so long ago."

"God bless you, Francisco Dolores; but tell me, why are you a prisoner here?"

"For a crime I never committed, I was arrested the very night I landed in Vera Cruz to seek you. Your Persian nurse, and the Mexican woman at whose house you were, I found dead, and was accused of their murder, and brought here by Felipe Cosala—"

"Felipe Cosala!" shouted Merle, in a voice of thunder, springing to his feet.

"Ay, my son, Felipe Cosala, a Mexican spy, who tried to force from me the knowledge of where your father's treasures lay hidden; but I thwarted him, even though I remained here. You know him, then?"

"Ay, do I. He had me thrown in a dungeon fifteen long years ago. Oh! how kind has Fate been to bring me here to you, Francisco Dolores. I have worked for fifteen awful years under ground, and I believed I was outside the castle walls, and was cutting my way upward, and Destiny led me straight to you—you whom I love next to my father's memory—"

"He is dead, then?" sadly asked the priest.

"He is dead, and I will tell you how he died."

Seating himself on a chair by the cot-side, Merle told Francisco Dolores all with which the reader is already acquainted, and then heard from the trembling lips of the old priest of his thirty years of suffering.

"Felipe Cosala kept you here, senior, for the

same reason he held me—to find, through you, that hidden treasure. When did you see him last?"

"Thirteen years ago; it was the day he left the castle to the command of General Bravo."

"He came to me and begged that I would tell him where lay the treasures, and when I refused, he again threatened; then he left me, saying I should die by starvation; but old Pablo, the jailer, has kept me alive, and told all that this cell was vacant, for, as a priest of his church, he pitied me."

"For thirty years, with chisels made from my bed-screws, and pieces of knives, I have worked away at this stone, and now, when freedom stares me in the face, I dare not rise up to meet it; but you, Merle, my son, can go, and the world is before you."

"I will not leave you here, Senior Dolores."

"Boy, you are mad!"

"I have said it."

"Boy, I may die this very night; I feel even now Death's presence in the room, and I command you to go—go and avenge me—avenge yourself! Those who placed you here yet live."

Francisco Dolores had struck the right chord.

Merle sprung to his feet, his face writhing with passion; his marble-like complexion could get no whiter, but the blue veins stood out upon the forehead like whip-cords, and the even teeth gritted together savagely.

"Revenge! ay, Francisco Dolores, you have spoken the word."

"Revenge! by the Eternal God above! I shall live but for revenge."

"Behold! do you see these ragged seams across my back?"

"The lash left those scars—laid on at the command of one I believed my friend."

"Old man, what did not my poor outlawed father suffer?"

"What have I not suffered?"

"And you! thirty years within this stone perdition, and those who placed us here yet walking God's green earth."

"But there shall come a day of retribution! A day when men shall cry to me for mercy, and my heart shall hold no mercy. No, it shall be as merciless as these stone walls have been, and the hate of Felipe Cosala, compared with mine, shall be as joyous laughter."

"Oh! have I not suffered? suffered by day and by night—dreading, hoping, toiling on—suffered, until, when in my thirty-fifth year I am a man with a heart of iron."

"If you cannot go with me, old man, stay not the hand of Death—let his icy touch still your pulse, that I may hasten to my revenge."

"Ha! ha! ha! when you are in yonder spirit land, you will look down and see how he, whom men call Merle the Mutineer, the Deserter, the Pirate, can revenge those who have wronged him! You will see how he can dance with joy to the music of the groans of anguish that break from the lips of those he drags to retribution. Ha! ha! ha! old man, a merry devil of delight have you stirred in me by that one word—revenge."

Striking his hands upon his forehead the raving man staggered backward; his knees bent under him, and he fell prone upon the floor.

Francisco Dolores had indeed raised a very demon of hate and revenge in his breast—a demon that would yet slake its thirst in the misery of others.

"Poor boy," and the priest bent over him.

"Poor boy—he is on the threshold of life—I am on the threshold of death."

"God pity him."

CHAPTER XVI.

CAST UP BY THE SEA.

A small, and swift-sailing goleta, such as are often seen close in shore in West Indian waters, was swiftly flying over a storm-swept sea, and bounding toward an island upon the Mexican coast, and a couple of leagues from the main.

The boat had a small cabin aft, a deep cockpit and was stanch and swift; but the wind was blowing Lalia gale, and yet she was driven on her course unswervingly, though the waves washed her decks, and ever and anon she swooped low under the pressure of the storm.

In the little craft were two men; one a Mexican of sixty, with swarthy face, restless eyes, and a nervous manner, as he glanced out over the rough waters with an anxiety that proved he was no seaman.

The other, and the one who held the helm, was recognizable, by his long hair and beard, his splendid form and remarkable face, as Merle, and the manner in which he held the vessel on its course proved that his hand had not forgotten its cunning during the long years of his burial from the world.

"Senior, would to God I had never come," broke from the lips of the Mexican, as a rudergust sent the little craft further over than usual.

"The island lies yonder, as you see, Pablo; we will reach it within the hour," was the calm reply.

"I fear not, Senior Merle; I fear we will never reach it alive."

"I will do so, Pablo, for I have not escaped

from that accursed den of misery to die now," was the determined rejoinder.

"Then, if we go over, *senor*, I will cling to you; you do look like one to defy Fate, and the good old *padre* told me never to desert you."

"You loved the good old man, Pablo?"

"Much, *senor*, and when I came into the cell and found you there, and you swore not to desert him while he lived, I was drawn toward you, too."

"Yes, the good old *padre* forgave me my every sin, for I confessed to him, and it never so much as cost me a *peso*—only a little extra work, and if you had not come I was to fulfill an important mission for him. Sainted Virgin! but how the wind blows."

"This is a calm sea, Pablo, to what I have seen. Then it was your intention to leave the castle anyway?"

"Yes, *senor*, as soon as the *padre* died; I cared not to remain after he was gone, and I was glad of an offer of service with you. You must be a rich man, *senor*, from what the *padre* told me?"

"I will be soon, Pablo. Do you know, for a landsman, good Pablo, you got me a very stiff little boat? I could not have selected a better one myself."

"*Gracias, senor*, but I got an *amigo*, who was a sailor, my sister's husband, to buy it for me; it was he that rowed us out from the beach; but, *senor*, how glad I would have been if the *padre* could have lasted longer and been with us."

"Yes, worthy Pablo; it would have been a great joy for me; but, poor old man, he had lived his allotted time, and was ready to go."

"I do not believe he would have lived through the night if I had not come, for sight of me caused him to cling to life a few hours longer."

"And he would not allow you to lower him down from the cell, *senor*?"

"No, hence I remained with him until he died, and then carried him through the tunnel and buried him by the side of another poor unfortunate who had died in that horrid prison."

"And you heard no noises outside the cell after I left, *senor*?"

"Once I heard footsteps; but the jailer who took your place evidently believed that the cell was unoccupied, as you told him, and my having the key, kept him from endeavoring to find out."

"And you did not doubt me, *senor*?"

"No," answered Merle, sternly.

"You did not know but that when I promised to go and get your clothing in Vera Cruz, buy a boat for you, and meet you off the beach below the castle, but what I might be playing you false, *senor*?"

"Yes, I knew you would prove true," dryly returned Merle.

"Because the *padre* trusted me?"

"No."

"Why then, *Senor Merle*?"

"Because I read you, *amigo* Pablo; because, when I gave you the jewels the *Padre* Dolores had given me, and told you I would double their value if you proved faithful, I knew I could trust you, for I saw that you worshiped the earthly god that most men do—gold."

"Ah! *senor*, I do love gold, and I have here close in my jacket, the riches you have given me; I knew not the *padre* had such wealth, *senor*."

"He found jewels easier to carry than gold, Pablo; but you befriended the poor old man, and I shall repay you for it. You shall be a rich man, Pablo, and I will give you good wages for serving me; if you fail me, I will kill you without hesitation or remorse, as I would have done in the cell, had I not read your sordid nature, and have known that I could trust you," and Merle spoke with an earnestness that proved to the Mexican that he had entered into the service of a dangerous master.

As if to change the subject, he asked:

"Did you have any trouble, *senor*, in getting out of the cell?"

"None, whatever; the *padre*'s rope, and one that I had, were amply long enough, and perfectly strong—I lowered the mementoes of my prison life in a bag first, and then swung myself out and reached the ground in safety."

"The hole was doubtless seen the next morning by the guards, *senor*?"

"Doubtless, but it proved a puzzle to them, for they could not discover that any prisoner had escaped; the hole was there, the rope hanging from it, but the *padre*'s cell was supposed to be unoccupied, and the hole in the flooring I filled up, pressed down, and graveled over, so that it was not discernible."

"I was supposed to be dead thirteen years before; you had resigned your jailership and boldly left the castle, proving to your successor that every wretch you had charge of was in his cell, and I had buried the *padre* a hundred yards from where he died, and the jailer who had befriended me for thirteen long years, had packed down, with my aid, the dirt I dug from the tunnel and stopped up his end of it, so that the keepers of that stone hell will have food for reflection; and something to puzzle them for many a long day to come," and Merle smiled grimly.

Then he added:

"But there was one mistake we made, good Pablo."

"*Senor*?"

"I should have lured the new keeper into the cell, killed him, or bought him, and with his keys liberated every poor unfortunate in his tier of dungeons. It would have eased my conscience, Pablo; but in the work devolving upon me, after your departure, I never thought of it."

"But many of them are guilty, *senor*."

"That is not for you to say; I am innocent of crime, and was imprisoned, and *Padre* Dolores spent thirty years in a cell, and was as guiltless of wrong-doing as a man could be. If, from his friendship for a man who had served him, he followed his fortunes through good and evil, he deserved no reproach."

"I tell you, Pablo, Francisco Dolores was a prince among men. Had he been a traitor I would not now be in this boat, heading for yon island."

"No, *senor*; but do you know I have not breathed freely since the night I left the castle."

"You should show more nerve, Pablo."

"It was the first and second nights disappointment, *senor*; when my brother-in-law and myself were at the beach with the boat two nights and you did not come, I was fearful all was lost, yet dare not return to the castle to find out," and the man shuddered.

"I came not, as I told you, Pablo, because I would not leave the *Padre* Dolores until he died; he was there through faithfulness to my father and myself, and I would have gone back to a dungeon rather than desert him alive."

"*Senor*, you are a remarkable man, and God pity your enemies," said Pablo, gazing with awe upon the marble-faced man at the tiller whose large, melancholy, yet burning eyes were constantly fixed upon the island ahead.

Merle smiled, but made no reply, and Pablo continued:

"The sea is getting wilder, *senor*?"

"Yes."

"And the wind increases?"

"Yes."

"See those clouds sweeping down upon us—they seem to trail in the sea."

"Yes, Pablo, they come with a vengeance."

"And will drown us, *senor*?" cried the shivering wretch.

"Not me, Pablo."

"But I will die, *senor*, I know I shall die. I feel it here," and the Mexican placed his hand upon his heart.

"Never say die, Pablo; I would have been dead long ago, and, if it were possible, would have died many deaths, if I had yielded."

"But I will not yet yield to death, Pablo *amigo*."

There was a look of such utter defiance to fate in the face of Merle, a look so utterly unfathomable, that the Mexican crept nearer to him, feeling that he had the power to save him.

"*Senor*, you do not fear God nor man," said Pablo, in an awed whisper.

"Or the devil, Pablo," replied Merle, with a bitter laugh.

"The island is certainly the one you seek, *senor*?"

"Yes, Pablo; I have not been there since I was a few days old, but I recognize it from the *padre*'s description."

"And it is yet how far off, *senor*?"

"A league, good Pablo!"

"We shall never reach it, *senor*."

"I shall; but hold hard, Pablo!"

As Merle spoke the storm was upon the devoted little craft, which the skillful helmsman at once brought up to meet.

But there came a rush of waters, a howling of winds, and then one, two, loud snaps; the masts had gone—torn off close to the deck.

And with the wreck of the masts, sails and rigging, were dragged the two men—the Mexican shrieking loudly to the Blessed Virgin to save him—Merle stern, calm, resolute.

Then came a cry from the Mexican:

"*Senor*, save me! for the love of God! save a poor wretch!"

"It is impossible, *amigo* Pablo—my arm is broken, and I have no support," was shouted back in reply, but there was no tremor in the tones.

"We are lost," shrieked the Mexican, and he went down into the wild waters, not hearing the defiant response:

"You will die, good Pablo; I shall not."

Then the darkness of the storm hid the scene from view of one who had watched the little craft for two hours bounding over the rough waters toward the island.

It was a man and a strange one—standing upon a high point of the island and gazing over the sea.

A man fully seven feet in height—his face as black as ebony and his form a perfect Hercules in strength.

He was dressed in white trousers, reaching to the knees, a blue silk shirt; wore sandals laced around the ankles, and a turban upon his head—a turban of white silk, and in the front of which was an anchor of rubies.

Around his waist was a sash of silver thread, and in it were stuck two strange-looking pistols,

mounted with gold, and a long dagger, the hilt being an anchor of gold, set with diamonds and rubies.

What the age of the man was it were hard to discover; he might be thirty, he might be sixty; but he was a Nubian, and his face was as full of manly dignity as his form possessed leonine grace and strength.

As he stood upon the island, gazing fixedly upon the coming boat, and now and then at the storm approaching, he said, in a guttural dialect:

"He is coming at last—the Vishnu guides him hither—and it is time, for I was left here when *Yezdegerdian** was 1168—now it is 1203."

"Yes, for thirty-five Christian years I have held my post, and I will win my master's smile."

"Strange he has not come here for so long; I have thrown seven thousand and three hundred pebbles in the vase since last he anchored his schooner yonder under the land and came ashore at night with his treasures in the boat."

"He said he would come again one day and take me with him, and he will keep his word; but I suppose he yet hunts for the young master and the *Padre* Francisco. I would never have been tired living here had those two come, as my master intended they should; but the Vishnu ruled that I should remain alone to guard the treasures, and the mighty eye of Vishnu is upon me day and night."

"Seven thousand three hundred days—and to-day I must throw another pebble in the vase; the Vishnu grant it be the last, for I am weary."

"How bravely his boat comes on. There are two in the craft—*Padre* Francisco is with him; but I will get my glass and see."

Turning, he hastily descended from the point and after a rapid walk entered a small jungle through which led a beaten path.

In a few moments he came to a mass of rocks piled in wild, fantastic shape upon each other, evidently a freak of nature during the glacial period.

Among these diluvium washings of rocks the Nubian glided, and disappeared in a cavern, where, amid untold wealth of gold, jewels, silks, velvets, laces, costly wines and liquors, he had made his home for thirty-five years—the faithful guardian of the island treasure in all that dreary time of waiting.

When he issued from the cavern he had around him a heavy *capote*, and in his hand he carried a large spy-glass.

In the time he had been absent from the point of land, the clouds had darkened materially, and the sea grown rougher, while the winds tugged at his cloak so savagely he was forced to lay it aside.

Leveling the glass upon the approaching boat, now not more than a league distant, he muttered:

"That is not the *Padre* Francisco, for I see his face now; the other I do not see on account of the sail."

"But I feel that it is my master; the Fetish warned me of his coming."

"Come, come, Fetish, bring the vision before my eyes."

Dropping the glass, as he called out in a loud tone, as to an imaginary being, he placed his hands tightly over his eyes and dropped upon his knees.

A moment he remained thus, muttering unintelligible words, and then he sprung to his feet, his hand upon the jewel-hilted dagger.

"It is not the master! I saw strange faces in the Fetish glass held before my eyes. They come to rob me of my master's treasures; but they shall die—they shall die."

"Ha! ha! ha! they are already in the hollow of the Vishnu's hand!" and the strange being bounded about with fiendish joy as the storm struck the little craft, and its crew were hurled into the sea.

When the first rude gust of the gale had blown on, the Nubian again turned his gaze out over the waters.

"The craft comes on afloat; but they were washed away to die."

"The Vishnu's eye is upon them, and he will sink them deep into the sea."

"He is pleased with Valik because he has been faithful so long—has so long guarded the treasure, though his master came not."

"But he will come; Valik knows he will come, for her grave is yonder, and my mighty master loved her as the sunlight of his heart."

"Ha! ha! see how the wreck drives on toward the island! Valik will meet it at the beach."

As he spoke the strange creature leisurely descended to the shore, and took his stand at a point opposite where he expected the dismayed craft to strike, and folding his *capote* closer around him, awaited.

Nearer and nearer came the little hulk, until, upon the top of a mighty wave, it was borne far up on the beach, and seizing it in his giant grasp, aided by the water, Valik drew it almost out of reach of the waves.

As he turned away a dark object upon the waters caught his quick eyes, and he gazed earnestly at it.

Now on the top of a wave, now in the hollow

* An era used by Persians in computations of time

of the sea, the object came on, until, by a breaker, it was hurled upon the white shore, and rolled to the feet of the Nubian.

With a cry he sprung toward it, and bent down.

It was a human form, the face bruised by the waves, the clothing half torn from the body.

With a cry of rage, the Nubian placed his hand over the heart.

"It is still; he has no life, but I will make sure. His face is strange to me. Valik goes back fifty years in memory, and he never saw this man before.

"He belongs not here on the treasure isle. He came to rob my mighty master, and Valik's knife must be true—it must seek his heart, for dead men sometimes come to life; but he shall not."

As the Nubian spoke he drew his long blade from his sash, poised it one instant above the pulseless heart and brought it down with terrible force, straight into the unguarded side.

There came no quiver of the frame, no contraction of the muscles—the man was dead ere he was hurled upon the beach by the cruel sea.

Then in mad glee the Nubian again danced upon the sands, waving his blood-stained knife above his head.

"The Vishnu's eye smiles on Valik," he shouted, several times in his hoarse tones, and the man seemed turned into a dancing Dervish.

Suddenly he stopped, and fixed his eyes again upon the sea.

"There were two of them; the other will come, and their blood will mingle on my knife-point.

"Hal hal the Vishnu will again smile on Valik."

Then another dark object upon the wild waters caught his gaze.

It was coming shoreward as the other had done—now lost to sight, now in full view.

Nearer and nearer it came, until upon a breaker it was dashed ashore.

A human form; but not dead!

The half-drowned man essayed to rise, staggered and fell.

With a bound, and a burst of wild laughter, Valik was upon him—his blood-stained knife in hand.

Dragging aside the Mexican jacket and shirt, to give his knife fair play, Valik poised the blade in mid-air.

But the jeweled dagger fell from his hand, the point burying itself deep in the sand and not in the heart for which it was intended.

Then a wild shriek broke from the Nubian's lips, and bowing his head down to the earth, he cried:

"The tattoo of the Red Anchor covers his heart."

"Oh, my master, Valik is thy slave." But no word came from the clenched teeth of the man who lay before him—he was unconscious—or dead.

CHAPTER XVII.

MONTENZUMA.

AFTER a lapse of many years, kind reader, I again bring the scenes of my story to New Orleans—the Paris of the Western Hemisphere.

In the gorgeous saloon of the *Cafe Bourse*, beneath the *Hotel Saint Louis*, were gathered several groups of gentlemen, engaged in animated conversation, and the pleasurable occupation of sipping "sherry-cobblers," "mint-juleps," iced champagne, and other popular American drinks.

Some were seated at small gilt tables, with wine and biscuit before them, and others were standing in front of the marble "bar," which extended for sixty feet along one side of the saloon.

Among these latter were noticeable several faces well known to the readers of this romance.

The gentleman carelessly leaning upon the bar with one arm, a glass of champagne at his elbow, and relating some amusing anecdote of the day—for it is *Carnival* time, and the streets are crowded with grotesque forms and masked faces—is Don Felipe Cosala, at one time the Monte Prince of Mexico, but now supposed to be a Mexican of immense wealth, who, with his beautiful wife, has made his home in New Orleans, where his rank and riches have gained him *entree* to the aristocratic society of the city.

Though now in years an old man, his form is as erect as ever, his step as quick, and his face does not show that he has passed his fortieth year; crime and age have not silvered his black hair, nor dimmed the brightness of his eyes, and the same courtly grace of old hangs to him, as he talks to those around him.

At his right, sipping a mint-julep, is Captain Wilber Sebastian, the leading banker of the city, and the junior partner of his firm—Brainard Abercrombie—is at his side, a handsome young man of thirty; but with a *roue* air that was unmistakable.

As upon Don Felipe, age has dealt lightly with Wilber Sebastian, and he is yet among the gayest of the gay in his club.

Two others present are Dr. Lucien Bethune

and Lieutenant Otis Alden; both are still vampires upon Wilber Sebastian, who allows them a regular sum each year.

Both have married since the reader last met them. Lucien Bethune espoused a widow—for her money, and found that she knew well how to hold the purse-strings, and he is compelled to be content with what she doles out to him.

Otis Alden wedded a young girl—for her money; but her father was a speculator, blew out his brains, and left a mere pittance when he was supposed to be a millionaire.

Another is Louis Chandeaur, a wealthy shipping merchant, who has grown stout and red-faced, and left the sea for the quiet of an elegant home; though fond of the club and gay society, he never drinks, excepting a glass of *noyau* at times, or gambles.

At a small gilt table, with a bottle of champagne, sandwiches and sweet biscuit before them, are three other gentlemen.

The old gentleman with white hair and mustache, a military air, and a piercing eye, is Captain Arthur Grenville, and at his left sits a dark-faced, handsome man, once an officer of marines in the Spanish navy, but for a number of years past a banker in New Orleans. Upon his face rests a troubled look, and he is listening earnestly to the remarks of an elderly gentleman seated near him—Mr. Rosal Abercrombie, the senior partner of the banking-house of Abercrombie, Sebastian & Co.

Suddenly all eyes fall, as if by magnetic attraction, upon a tall form that enters the *salon*, and, approaching the bar, calls for a bottle of champagne.

"Will *monsieur* be seated, or have it opened here?" asked the polite bar-tender.

"I will drink it here, *merci*," he replied, in the purest French.

Who he was none knew, and they almost rudely gazed upon him, each with the one thought that a handsomer face and form they had never seen.

The stranger was tall, most graceful in every motion, and commanding in appearance, while his feet and hands were extremely small and shapely.

Upon the former were exquisitely made patent-leather boots, and white gloves of the finest kid he drew from his hands and laid upon the marble bar, alongside of a small ratan cane in the gold head of which flashed a diamond of remarkable size, yet not as large as a stone of the same kind set in a ring he wore on the little finger of his left hand.

His attire was certainly in the very best taste for a walking suit, and of the finest material—a sack coat of black silk velvet, with gold buttons, a vest of the same material, and white doe-skin pants.

A soft slouch hat, of grayish hue was upon his head, and in his cuffs were diamond solitaire buttons, the stones matching the one in the cane, and in his shirt-front burned a single ruby of rare size and blood-red brilliance.

But, most remarkable of all about this striking-looking man, was his face; it was as white as marble, and the skin as pure as an infant's, while the teeth were perfect and white as snow.

Each feature was faultless and strongly marked, the chin being massive, and nose straight, and the brow broad and intellectual.

His hair was black, waving, and fell upon his coat collar, while a dark silken mustache curled out over each shoulder, the ends being extremely long; but his eyes were the most remarkable features—intensely black, burning in their brightness, and yet within them dwelt an expression of touching sadness, as if inspired by haunting memories of a somber and embittered past.

Calmly he sipped his iced champagne, seemingly wholly unconscious of the admiration and attention he attracted, and occasionally speaking pleasantly to the bar-tender upon some ordinary topic.

Had he been listening, the following conversation would have reached his ears:

"I say, Sebastian," said Doctor Bethune, "I have some news for you—Montezuma has arrived in town."

"Montezuma?" cried several voices, while Captain Sebastian asked:

"Do you mean that Mexican Prince, who has been setting the capitals of the old world crazy with his wealth and magnificence?"

"The same; he gave London, Paris, and St. Petersburg a view of his imperial self, and outshone even the monarchs in his magnificence."

"Perhaps Don Felipe can tell us who he is?" said Brainard Abercrombie.

"I made inquiries some months since, when I saw that a Mexican was astounding Europe with his wealth and extravagant living, and I learned that he is from somewhere in the mountains of my country, and is a direct descendant of the Montezumas.

"He owns vast estates, and a score of silver mines, it is said, and from them comes his fabulous income; this is all that I could learn regarding him; you say he is in New Orleans, Bethune?" was Don Felipe's reply regarding a man whose name had been upon every aristocratic tongue in Europe for a year.

"Yes, he arrived last night in his yacht, and

has come here to live, I heard; I know that two large ships with his slaves and effects, followed the yacht into port, and are now anchored in the river.

"Going to live here, is he?" I must look him up and make his acquaintance, for a depositor of his magnitude would be a gold mine in a banking-house," laughed Wilber Sebastian.

"He is in the hotel now—came up from his yacht last night, and has the best suite of rooms in the house—those elegant apartments that look out upon the *Rue Royale*—Bégone! you accursed beggar."

The last part of Dr. Bethune's remarks were addressed to a *pauvre diable* of a man who had asked him for alms.

His emaciated frame, ragged habiliments and haggard face proved that he was indeed an object worthy of charity. Once his coat had rejoined in two skirts, but one tattered one alone remained, but half-hiding a generous patch in the seat of his trousers, while his knees were bare, his elbows out, and his feet incased in time worn shoes that showed he had no socks.

The luxury of linen he knew not, and his coat was buttoned up to his neck, to hide this deficiency in his wardrobe; in fact a more thorough tatterdemalion never walked the streets.

Had he worn a mask, it being *Carnival*, the attire would have seemed *apropos* to the occasion; but he wore no mask, and his face, stamped with gentility and refinement, poverty had not taken from him, was now pitiable in its distress.

"*Monsieur*, for the love of God, I ask your aid—I am a stranger in your city—was knocked down, robbed, became ill and am now sick and destitute."

There was something in the man's manner that carried conviction with his words, and several hands went into pockets at once; but Lucien Bethune, sordid, cruel and angry at being interrupted, turned, raised his ratan cane, and dealt the wretched being a smart rap across the face that caused him to stagger backward.

"For shame! Bethune!" cried a dozen voices, among them gentlemen unknown to the reader, and who had witnessed the cruel, cowardly act.

But, ere others could speak, a tall form glided in between the poor beggar and his assailant, and in a deep, yet clear voice was heard:

"*Monsieur*, you are a coward to strike such a creature as that."

Every man in the *salon* who had been sitting at the table sprung to his feet, and all crowded forward, for they felt some strange scene must follow, as Lucien Bethune was feared as a most dangerous man by all who knew him. He prided himself as a duelist, and had shot down several antagonists without compunction, besides; he was a large man, and few cared to measure strength with him.

The one who had so suddenly come to the rescue of the poor wretch was the elegant stranger, who had attracted such universal admiration, and he now quietly confronted Doctor Bethune, a smile upon his handsome face.

A few paces off, now forgotten, was the poor fellow who had been the cause of the trouble, wiping with his tattered hat the blood from his face, for the ratan had cut deep.

White as a corpse, and trembling with fury, Lucien Bethune drew himself up and cried:

"What did I understand you to say, *monsieur*?"

"That you are a coward—such you have just proven yourself."

The deep voice was calm, yet strangely distinct, and the smile yet hovered upon the lips.

All expected to see Lucien Bethune spring upon his insulter then and there, or shoot him in his tracks, for he was known to always go armed.

But they were mistaken. He merely said:

"You shall answer for this with your life, *monsieur*."

"At any time and place you desire, sir; but that does not help this poor fellow, and I am determined that he shall return the blow you so cruelly gave him."

Lucien Bethune started back—his face becoming a deadlier hue, and he dropped his hand upon his pistol-pocket.

But, ere he could move, he found himself seized with a power he did not believe mortal man possessed; his arms were in a vise of brass, it seemed, and he was held against the marble bar as though he were a mere child, while the stern voice of the stranger said:

"Come here, my man, and return the blow he gave you—take my ratan," and he allowed the diamond-studded cane to fall from beneath his arm.

But the poor fellow hung back, though he picked up the cane, and replied in a trembling voice:

"I do not care to strike him, sir."

"He must be taught a lesson, and others, too, who would deal with your class as he has done. One thousand dollars if you strike him."

This offer created the wildest excitement, and several stepped forward, as though to aid Lucien Bethune, who was wholly unable to move; but there was something in the smiling lips and burning eyes of the magnificent stran-

ger, something in his supernatural strength, that restrained them.

"Two thousand dollars, my man: The blow must be returned."

The poverty-stricken man was not proof against this. A few moments before he had asked for a franc to keep from starving, and had received a blow; now he was offered a fortune, it seemed, to return that blow to him that gave it.

Instantly the stranger's ratan swung around his head, and it fell smartly across the cruel yet handsome face of Lucien Bethune, while a cry broke from the lips of two-score men who witnessed it.

"Now, *monsieur*, this is my card. There, my man, is your pay," and the stranger threw what appeared to be a *gilt card* upon the bar in front of the pallid Bethune, whom he had released as the blow was given, and handed a roll of bills to the unfortunate creature whose want had called forth such a strange scene.

As the stranger bowed to those around him and stepped back to the bar, all expected to see Lucien Bethune shoot him dead; but he wiped his face with his handkerchief and took up the card.

It was a piece of solid gold, of the shape and thickness of a visiting-card, and upon it was beautifully engraved two words:

"MONTEZUMA,
"Mexico."

Paying for his wine, the elegant stranger calmly drew on his kid gloves, and strode toward the door of the *cafe*.

As he did so a tall form came from another doorway, where he had been standing unnoticed, and followed the stranger.

This second person was a black slave, a giant in size, and dressed as richly as his master, but in a far different style, for he wore a turban of white silk, in the front of which was a strange device—a shield of immense emeralds, set solid, and in them a rattlesnake formed of rare rubies, and an eagle of the purest diamonds.

A blue silk shirt and jacket, a sash of gold thread, white balloon trousers of rich cloth, confined at the ankles with gold buckles, and sandals, completed the black's strange and rich costume.

As the magnificent Mexican and his slave disappeared out of the door of the *Cafe Bourse*, a dozen voices cried:

"It is Montezuma, the Mexican *billionaire*!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

MONTEZUMA MAKES A PURCHASE.

THE hum of the conversation that immediately followed the departure of Montezuma from the *cafe*, as quickly ceased as he appeared again in the doorway.

"Pardon me, sir, but will you kindly inform me to whom this elegant turnout belongs?"

It was Montezuma that spoke, and he addressed Mr. Rosal Abercrombie, who was just then leaving the *cafe*, accompanied by Captain Arthur Grenville and the Cuban banker.

"It is the property of my partner, sir, Captain Sebastian," politely said Rosal Abercrombie.

"Again pardon me, sir; but is it for sale?"

"I think not; he has refused exceedingly large sums for the horses and carriage."

"But here he is; you might ask him, Captain Sebastian, this gentleman was admiring your team."

Wilber Sebastian approached and bowed politely. He had been struck by the splendid appearance of the Mexican prince, as he was called, and now saw a good opportunity to lay the cornerstone of getting him as a depositor in his firm, if he intended making New Orleans his home. This was a fine chance to begin an acquaintance, and he already liked the man for the way in which he had humiliated and punished Lucien Bethune, whom he now hated heartily, yet dare not show his hatred.

"Yes, *monsieur*, it is acknowledged to be far the handsomest team and rig in the city. I bought the turnout for my wife, but the horses are a little too lively for her," he said, with a certain sycophantic air.

"Then you will dispose of them, *monsieur*?"

"I have always refused to do so, as I prided myself upon the whole rig as being the finest in the country. I refused twelve thousand dollars for the horses and carriage, as they stand; of course that includes the negro coachman," laughed Captain Sebastian, and he gazed admiringly upon the pair of spirited black animals, the elegant, gold-mounted carriage and harness and the negro coachman in livery.

"*Monsieur*, when I desire anything I always make it a rule to buy it," said Montezuma, with a smile, and Wilber Sebastian felt now that he would get at least a thousand dollars more than he had before been offered, and made up his mind to sell if he did. "The carriage I do not particularly care for, as I have handsomer vehicles I brought here with me; but, as the turnout stands, and your coachman doubtless knows the city, I will give you twenty thousand dollars for all, my equipages and horses not being yet off my vessel."

Captain Sebastian was astounded—delighted, and eagerly bowed an assent, while the crowd

in the *cafe* door were equally amazed, and the negro coachman rolled up his eyes until the whites only were visible, while he murmured to himself:

"Praise de Lor', I is goin' to b'long to a prince, dat's a fact."

The bow of Wilber Sebastian was answer enough, and Montezuma turned to Valik and spoke a few words with him in a language unknown to those around.

Valik stepped forward, drew a heavy wallet from the folds of his sash, and handed to Captain Sebastian twenty crisp one thousand dollar bills.

"Thank you, *monsieur*," and Montezuma, started to enter the carriage, the door of which Valik opened, before the surprised banker could find his tongue.

"*Senor*," he said, in Spanish, "you do indeed have that which you wish, and I thank you heartily. My name is Wilber Sebastian, of the banking house of Abercrombie, Sebastian & Co., and myself and partners will do ourselves the honor of calling upon you. Will you return to the *cafe* now and have a bottle of wine?"

"No, thank you, sir," replied Montezuma, speaking in perfect English. "I have an engagement at present, and perhaps you may know, as a banker, where to tell my coachman to drive—I seek Andrea Angelos, Banker and Broker."

"He was here a moment since, sir; but permit me," and Wilber Sebastian approached the carriage, in which Montezuma was now seated; "permit me to tell you as a stranger to our city, that Angelos is on the eve of failure. If he does not pay notes due to-morrow, he will go under; I mention this as you may have intended depositing with him."

"I thank you, Mr. Sebastian, but I think you must be mistaken, as I was sent to the *Senor* Angelos by one of the richest firms in Paris. There is some mistake here, sir, I assure you."

"My name is Montezuma, sir, and I will be glad to see you and your friends as soon as I settle here, which will be in a few days. Good-morning, sir."

Wilber Sebastian reluctantly gave the address of Andrea Angelos to the coachman, and bowing low to the Mexican, turned away, while Valik springing to the box with the driver, the coach rolled rapidly away.

"Well, Wilber, what do you think of him?" asked his friends, crowding around him.

"He is a prince to spend money—twenty thousand dollars for what I would have taken thirteen. But, come in, all, and let us have some wine, and then I must hasten away, as lunch hour is over; but, where is Luce Bethune?"

"Oh! he left as soon as Montezuma took his iron clutch off of him. By Jove! did any one ever see such strength?" said Brainard Abercrombie.

"I thought Bethune was a powerful fellow, but the prince handled him as though he was a child," remarked Louis Chandeaur.

"Of course Doctor Bethune will call him out and kill him. *Mon Dieu!* to have a beggar slap one's face," and Don Felipe shrugged his shoulders in disgust.

"And get two thousand dollars for doing it! That Mexican is a dangerous fellow," said Rosal Abercrombie.

"He is a remarkable man; got into my carriage and drove off as coolly as though he had owned it all his life, while he told me he had better ones on his vessel, and merely bought mine until his could be unloaded. What will you drink, Don Felipe?"

But Don Felipe was reading a note handed him by a boy, and did not immediately answer; then he said:

"Champagne, iced, thank you. I have a note from Bethune, and he wishes me to act for him in his affair with Montezuma, and he invites you all to be present on the field; but have any of you seen that accursed beggar? Bethune wishes to make his more intimate acquaintance, too," and Don Felipe laughed, while having quaffed their wine, the aristocratic bloods left the *Cafe Bourse* to devote themselves to business or pleasure, as their inclinations prompted.

In the meantime Montezuma was driven rapidly through the streets by his new coachman, who was divided in his feelings between dread of the astonishing looking Valik by his side, and admiration for his master within.

When his lips would show his teeth in a grin of delight, he would suddenly catch sight of the piercing eyes of Valik fixed upon him, and would look as grave as a monkey.

"Dis is de identical place, sah," said the coachman, drawing up in front of a large banking house, over the door of which was a sign bearing the name of the firm:

"ANDREA ANGELOS,
"Banker and Broker."

Valik sprung to the ground and opened the door, and Montezuma walked into the bank,

* At the time of which I write dueling was not cried down, as now, in the Gulf States, but rather encouraged. — THE AUTHOR.

where the eyes of a dozen clerks were turned upon him.

All clerks are *au fait* in a well regulated stare, especially if the object of their gaze wears a petticoat.

But in this case they were perhaps excusable, as never had they seen a person of such striking appearance as was Montezuma.

"I would see Mr. Angelos," said the Mexican, politely, to the cashier.

"He is not in at present, sir; but will soon be. Walk into his private office, please."

Montezuma did so, and seated himself in an easy-chair of the elegant apartment.

But he had not long to wait before the banker walked in—Andrea Angelos, the same dark-faced man with the troubled look he had noticed at the *Cafe Bourse*, in conversation with Mr. Rosal Abercrombie and Captain Arthur Grenville.

"The *Senor* Angelos, I presume?" and Montezuma arose and extended his hand, while he added: "My name is Montezuma, of Mexico, sir."

Andrea Angelos grasped the small hand; it was white, shapely and cold.

"My name is Angelos, sir, and I am glad to meet you. I had the pleasure of seeing you punish Lucien Bethune at the *Cafe Bourse*, awhile since. It was splendid, sir, and you won golden opinions from all who were not afraid of the doctor, who has a dangerous name."

"I thought he deserved it, sir, and I am glad of your sanction."

"You certainly have it; but I just learned that Bethune intends calling you out, and has selected Don Felipe Cosala, a countryman of yours, as his second. Cosala is an old duelist, my lord," said Andrea Angelos, giving his visitor a title he had not claimed, yet which the banker seemed to think belonged to him, as he seemed "every inch a lord."

CHAPTER XIX.

FROM THE DEPTHS OF DESPAIR.

WHEN Andrea Angelos warned Montezuma against Don Felipe Cosala, the Mexican *billonaire* smiled pleasantly, and replied:

"It will give me pleasure to meet *Monsieur* Bethune and give him satisfaction for my act."

"Permit me again to place you on your guard, sir. He is a deadly hand with the pistol, and a dangerous foe with the sword."

Again Montezuma smiled, and said, quietly:

"I thank you, Mr. Angelos."

"After what you did for the poor wretch who begged for alms, I fear it is the intention of Bethune to make him trouble; Don Felipe was seeking him when I left the *cafe*."

"Indeed! Will you permit one of your clerks to summon my servant to me?"

In a moment Valik stood in the presence of his master, who gave him some instructions in a low tone, and the slave, placing a wallet upon the table, turned and walked rapidly away.

"Now, Mr. Angelos, I will talk business with you. As it is my intention to live in your city for some time, I wish to deposit with you."

Andrea Angelos turned deadly pale; and then his face flushed crimson as he replied:

"My lord, I will be honest with you. Your deposit would raise me to the seventh heaven did I care to act dishonorably with you, but I am now in the depths of despair as I stand on the brink of financial ruin."

Montezuma elevated his arched eyebrows in surprise, yet made no reply, and Mr. Angelos continued:

"Permit me, sir, to explain: circumstances of a painful nature, but which I can never regret, caused me to leave Havana, throwing up my commission as an officer of marines in the navy of Spain, and I came here with my young bride and entered into business with what capital I received through my wife, for I had little."

"For years I was successful, but then, through the influence of Messrs. Abercrombie, Sebastian & Co., I engaged in speculations that swamped me, and I was endeavoring to get Captain Arthur Grenville to buy up my notes held by the firm I mentioned, and to hold them until I could stagger from beneath the crushing load upon me."

"And Captain Grenville refused?" quietly asked Montezuma.

"He did, and it was necessary for him to do so. The truth is, his wife is much younger than he is, and is fearfully extravagant, and she plays heavily, loses a great deal at cards—but of course in a legitimate way in her own house, and the homes of her friends, and this keeps the captain poor in cash at present; but I tire you."

"Not in the least; but what will you do?"

"I know not, my lord. If my notes go to protest to-morrow I am ruined," gloomily replied Angelos.

"What are your liabilities—in *toto*?"

"A quarter of a million, sir."

"A mere *bagatelle*."

Andrea Angelos looked at the speaker in surprise.

"And what have you to pay that sum, Mr. Angelos?"

"My town-house, my banking-house and all I have is mortgaged up to the last dollar—I have not ten thousand in the safe."

"And Abercrombie & Company led you into this scrape?"

"Yes, sir, they made representations which, I am sorry to say, were untruthful; led me to believe they had invested largely in stock in which they had not a dollar, and trusting to them, for I never doubted them, I went recklessly on, until they now hold all my mortgages and a quarter of a million of my notes. I fear, sir, I have been tricked, as I was their rival, and drew from them some of their custom."

"Mr. Angelos, as you have acted honorably with me, I will do the same with you. What would clear your notes, mortgages, and all outstanding debts?"

"Four hundred thousand, sir, it would take." "A small sum to drive a man to the depths of despair," and across the face of Montezuma swept a smile of womanly sweetness that fascinated Andrea Angelos, as much as did his manner of speaking of hundreds of thousands of dollars as "a mere bagatelle."

"I have reason to know, sir, as Mr. Sebastian warned me not to deposit with you, and yet I came here, and you have told me honestly your condition, and refused to take my money in keeping."

"To Mr. Sebastian I replied that there was some mistake—you had ample backers, and were well recommended to me, and I desire to prove my words to him good."

"Here, sir, is in this roll of bills, a half a million dollars, which I desire you to accept as a loan from me, without interest, and on any time you desire; and here, sir—"

But he said no more, as Andrea Angelos had fallen from his chair in a dead faint.

Montezuma quietly raised him from the floor and laid him upon a lounge—then, taking from his pocket a lancet, he quickly bled him in the arm, holding it over a spittoon.

Then he arose and bathed his head with water from the ice-cooler.

"Ah, Mr. Angelos, you are all right again I am glad to see; I took the liberty of bleeding you, and called no one."

"My lord, did I hear aright your words?" gasped the banker.

"You did, sir, the half-million loan lies there."

"Oh, God! what joy to my poor wife! It was not for myself I cared but to keep the shock from her, for, my lord, when she married me her father cast her off, and we were banished from Cuba, and came here."

"Then all is well now, I am glad to say. Now, again to business, Mr. Angelos; I wish to deposit with you. Here," and he picked up the wallet that Velik had laid upon the table, "you will find ten million dollars in Bank of England notes, and in this package as much more in notes of the Bank of France."

Andrea Angelos could not speak.

Was he in a wild dream? Was he talking to a mortal man?

At last, with a sigh, he regained his composure somewhat, and asked:

"And you wish to deposit this immense sum with me?"

"I do, and after awhile I will have much more to place in your hands," said Montezuma, with the utmost indifference.

"The truth is, Mr. Angelos, I am a little extravagant, and desire to have every comfort and luxury around me."

"My income is large, and it is my intention to buy a home in your city, and another over upon the lake-shores for a country-seat. Perhaps you know of such places for sale?"

"I have heard that Captain Grenville might sell his place on the lake."

"And somewhere I learned that the Abercrombie place was a very handsome estate on the lake."

"It is, my lord; it was left by Commodore Brainard, at his death some years ago, to his grandson, Brainard Abercrombie; but it is not for sale, I know."

"That is the place I desire, Mr. Angelos; please send one of your clerks over to the bank and purchase the estate."

"He will not sell it, sir; he has refused to do so often."

"At what does he value the estate?"

"At a very large sum, I know; he made costly alterations and additions to the house, and spent thousands upon the grounds."

"Please send your cashier over to buy it, Mr. Angelos," was the quiet reply.

Andrea Angelos looked at his patron with surprise; but he had seen him purchase, half an hour before, a carriage and horses that were not for sale, and he called his cashier.

"The Senor Montezuma desires you to go over to the banking-house of Abercrombie & Company, and purchase the Lake estate of Mr. Brainard Abercrombie."

"It is not for sale, sir."

"So I told the gentleman, but he wishes it."

"At what price, sir?" and the cashier turned to Montezuma, who coolly answered:

"At any price, sir; buy it."

The cashier disappeared, and Montezuma turned again to the banker:

"Now, sir, for a city residence. You see, as I am a stranger here, I am making you my adviser and agent, Mr. Angelos."

"I will be only too happy to serve you, my lord; the Monteith, or rather now the Sebastian mansion, is the most elegant in the city, but that is not for sale either."

"I must have it, sir; how is it located?"

"It occupies one corner of a square, sir, and the stable and gardens surround it on two sides."

"It does not take in the whole square, then?"

"No, sir; there are two other residences on the square, one owned by Captain Grenville, the other by Dr. Bethune, or rather his wife."

"I wish the whole square, Mr. Angelos. The Sebastian mansion is, I suppose, the largest?"

"It is, sir, and the finest in the city."

"Then Messrs. Sebastian, Grenville and Bethune must seek other quarters, for I will buy their homes. Let me see, Mr. Angelos, I wish the Grenville and Bethune houses torn down, and all turned into a garden, surrounded by a high wall of brick. The Sebastian mansion, I expect, will do as it is, but the stables must be enlarged, and the house put in most thorough order."

"I am almost afraid, my lord, to tell you that these places cannot be bought."

"They must be bought, Mr. Angelos; I desire them, and I wish the improvements suggested to be completed within the week, I was going to say; but I will say two weeks."

"My lord, it will be impossible—"

"Many hands make light work, my dear sir, and I will move in within two weeks. Ah! here is your cashier. Now I will give you a plan for improvements at the mansion on the lake."

"He will not sell, sir," said the cashier.

Montezuma looked at him in polite surprise.

"He refuses double what the place is worth," explained the cashier.

"My dear sir, I asked you to buy the place."

"Mr. Mercer, my Lord Montezuma has just deposited with me twenty millions of dollars, and he desires to purchase the Abercrombie estate for a country-seat, and then I wish you to go up and buy the Sebastian, Grenville and Bethune mansions, for a city residence for the Montezuma," said Andrea Angelos, who now saw that he had a man to deal with, who considered money of no value, and would have what he desired.

The eyes of the cashier widened, and he was happy, for the banking-house of Andrea Angelos was solid, now, he thought.

Bowing low he disappeared from the office and in twenty minutes returned.

"He was angry at my worrying him, and said he would take a quarter of a million, thinking to bluff me, and I closed with him immediately, sir."

"You were right, Mr. Mercer. Always, when you go to do anything for me, accomplish it at your first visit. Are you married, sir?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Do you keep house?"

"I am renting a little place on the edge of town which I hope to buy, my lord."

"At what price, sir?"

"Five thousand dollars, my lord."

"Please take this and purchase your house. Every man should own the house he lives in," and Montezuma handed a roll of bills to the delighted cashier, whose tongue clove to the roof of his mouth with surprised delight.

"Mr. Mercer, now go up and buy the mansions Mr. Angelos spoke of awhile since."

The cashier left the office, and jumped four feet high, as soon as the door was closed, to the great astonishment of his fellow-clerks, who thought he had been suddenly seized with St. Vitus's dance.

"Now, Mr. Angelos, I wish you to put men at once to tearing down the Grenville and Bethune mansions, and fitting up the Sebastian home. Also enlarge the stables and improve and ornament the grounds. I hope you consider it unnecessary for me to say spare no expense, cost what it may, sir."

"I understand you, my lord."

"Please do not call me my lord. I am plain Mister Montezuma, a Mexican country gentleman."

"As you please, Mister Montezuma."

"Thank you. I dislike titles. Now, Mr. Angelos, I intend running over to the lake shore to see how I can improve my purchase there."

"But your duel, sir?"

"Ah! I had forgotten about that."

"What a man!" thought Andrea Angelos—"forgotten that he has to face the most dangerous citizen we have, in a duel."

"He will certainly call you out, sir, and I did not wish it said you had left to avoid it," explained the banker.

"My dear Angelos, you will find, when you know me better, that I never swerve from my path for any man. By the way, I shall have to ask you to act for me as second."

"With pleasure, sir. Now give your commands, sir, in regard to all you wish done with your mansion, and it shall be attended to," said

Andrea Angelos, falling in with his patron's manner and thoroughly convinced that the three lordly mansions on Rue St. Louis would be purchased by Mercer.

In a few words Montezuma gave his instructions, and then added:

"I have my own vessels at anchor in the river, with furniture for both my city and country houses. I bought it in Paris, and as soon as the mansions are ready I wish it moved in."

"My horses, carriages and servants are also on board the vessels, and I shall remain at the Hotel Saint Louis until I can move into my own house."

"Ah, Mercer?" and Andrea Angelos almost feared to ask the result of his cashier.

"I found Mrs. Bethune at home, and she refused to listen to me until I made her an offer, and she accepted it."

"Captain Grenville was at Abercrombie & Co.'s, so I saw him with Captain Sebastian and made them an offer, which they too accepted. All three families will give possession day after to-morrow."

"You have done well, Mercer; now, Mr. Montezuma, I am going to beg that you do me the honor to dine with me to-day."

"With pleasure, sir; at what hour?"

"At four, sir. We dine earlier to-day, on account of the Carnival ball to-night."

"I will be punctual, sir," and Montezuma arose to take his departure.

"Don Felipe Cosala would see you, sir," said the cashier.

"Ask him in, if agreeable to you, Mr. Angelos," quietly returned Montezuma.

"Perfectly; he bears a challenge, I am confident."

Don Felipe Cosala entered, and the banker presented him to Montezuma.

"Pardon, senor, but I saw your carriage at the door, and called in to ask at what hour I could see you at your hotel?" said Don Felipe, in his courtly manner.

"I am engaged for the day, sir; will you not make known your business here?"

"Certainly, if you desire it. I am the bearer of an unpleasant message, sir, from my friend, Doctor Lucien Bethune."

"A challenge, doubtless?" quietly asked Montezuma.

"It is, sir."

"My friend, Mr. Angelos, will act for me, sir," and turning to the banker he continued:

"Any terms you may make, Mr. Angelos, will oblige me."

"But weapons, Mr. Montezuma?"

"Perfectly immaterial, sir. As for the time, the sooner the better—say to-morrow morning, as I wish to take a cruise in my yacht over the lake shore. I will be punctual at dinner, Angelos."

"Au revoir, messieurs," and Montezuma bowed low and left the office, and entering his carriage was driven back to the Hotel Saint Louis.

"Cool as champagne on ice, I call that. Bethune had better look to himself," muttered Don Felipe.

"So I think, Don Cosala," and the two seconds sat down to discuss the arrangements for a meeting which must be deadly in its termination.

Twenty minutes after Andrea Angelos drove home, a happy light on his handsome face; he was no longer in the depths of despair, and he had much to tell his beautiful wife about the magnificent Montezuma.

CHAPTER XX.

OTIS ALDEN RECEIVES A CARTE D'OR.

AS I have already, in a previous chapter, spoken of the grand Carnival ball, *en masque*, given at the Salon Saint Louis each year, I will only here state that the gay Louisianians seemed to consider it their duty and pleasure to make these entertainments more superb with each return of the merry season of Mask, and upon the occasion following the arrival of Montezuma in the "Crescent City," it certainly surpassed all the other gatherings of the kind, in every particular of magnificence.

As the crowds of gay dancers whirled around the brilliant saloon, and the regiments of promenaders wended their way hither and thither, they all seemed determined upon catching sight of one personage who had come there *en masque*.

This object of universal attention was a tall form in the costume of a knight, or rather the armor, and with his visor down, to hide his face.

But the most remarkable of all was that the helmet was certainly of solid gold, and the whole armor of gold and silver, while it was gemmed with diamonds and rubies of the largest size and of exquisite luster.

In one hand the knight carried a long lance of pure gold, the handle set with emeralds, and in the other he held a shield that was like the sun at noonday to look upon, so dazzling was it to the eyes of the beholders.

It was a large shield, the frame of solid gold and at the points were rubies of immense size, while an opal, the size of a walnut, sent its rainbow hues out from the center

All the rest of the shield was a solid mass of diamonds.

No one, after a look upon this remarkable knight, could doubt but that the gems he wore were of the purest, and worth millions of dollars, and that his helmet and armor were gold and silver.

With a quiet, easy grace the knight strode through the saloon, apparently enjoying the brilliant scene, and seemingly unconscious that he was the magnet that attracted all eyes.

Of course there was but one thought in every mind as to who this personage could be.

It was Montezuma, of Mexico.

Who else could wear such an immense fortune in precious metal and rich gems?

Already was his name upon every tongue, rich and poor, and he was the "lion of lions."

His punishment of Lucien Bethune, on account of his striking a beggar, had won the hearts of the *sub strata*.

His purchase of Wilber Sebastian's turnout—then the three elegant mansions on the *Rue Saint Louis*, two of which he intended pulling down to give place to a garden spot, had won the hearts of the rich.

His undoubted courage and marvelous strength took splendidly with "the men 'bout town," and the women, young and old, married and single, rich and poor, were crazy, because—he was a bachelor.

His extravagances, his wealth untold, his deeds since coming to town, his elegant form, and startlingly strange and handsome face, were now the theme of every tongue, and it was no wonder that the dazzling knight was at once known to be Montezuma.

In fact, when he arrived at the door of the saloon, and tendered his sword to the keeper, that functionary had gazed upon it with open mouth, held it as though it were glass, and then returned it, with the remark:

"It is too valuable, Prince, to leave here; please retain it."

With a bow, and a handful of eagles into the palm of the arms-keeper, the knight passed into the *salon*, his ears catching the words:

"That is the Prince Montezuma."

Presently two persons approached the knight—a lady exquisitely dressed, leaning upon the arm of a gentleman in silk *domino*.

Both were masked, and had evidently been searching for the "star of the evening," for the gentleman said, aloud:

"Ah! Sir Knight, we are glad to have found you."

"And I am glad to be found. Will you accept my arm, fair lady?" and the knight offered his arm, and the three walked away to the disgust of the idlers who had been critically examining the stranger's armor.

"Is it permissible to ask if I can offer you refreshments, my friends, and beg that you will request the company of all whom you may wish to invite?"

"Yes, Sir Knight, we will accept with pleasure; but, what means this disturbance?" and the gentlemen halted, as there seemed some excitement in their front.

"It is an interesting affair, messieurs and madame," volunteered a loquacious bystander.

"It seems *monsieur* there, in the red mask and cavalier suit, has had two *demoiselles* following him the whole evening; one of whom he brought with him, and the other one attaching herself to him after his arrival; but as the ladies were dressed exactly alike, and, as you see, are alike in size and form, he knew not which was the true one, until she, with whom he came, unmasked to show him, and in his anger he has just torn the mask from the face of the other—you see her weeping? yet she still insists upon being with him, and he evidently recognizes her as some one he did not care to see."

"Pardon, lady, I will leave you on the arm of the *senor*, who I trust will kindly hold these for me."

As the knight spoke, he handed to his gentleman companion his lance and shield.

The next instant he confronted the angry, and evidently embarrassed man, that had unmasked a lady who had tormented him.

"*Monsieur*," and the voice was strangely calm, while a silence like death fell upon all present.

"*Monsieur*, you unmasked a lady in a public saloon, where every mask is respected, and for it I shall show to these good people the face of a coward."

As the knight spoke he suddenly seized the red mask and tore it from the face of the man before him.

It was Otis Alden that was revealed—his face now utterly colorless.

"It is as I knew—my husband! Otis, Otis, you have broken my heart," and the lady who was unmasked, a young and lovely, yet sad-faced woman, turned dejectedly away and disappeared in the crowd.

For an instant all believed that Otis Alden would spring upon the man who had unmasked him, for they knew his violent temper, and that he was not lacking in personal courage.

But perhaps he knew the man before him and dared not risk his strength with his; at any rate he contented himself with saying:

"Will you raise your visor, sir, that I may know you when we meet to wipe out the insult just offered me?"

The knight raised his hand, touched a spring, and the gold visor flew up, revealing the smiling, handsome face of Montezuma, who quietly said:

"As *monsieur* hints at a meeting, allow me to offer my card. I will be in the saloon for two hours, and trust a meeting can be arranged for the morning, as I have engagements to call me from the city after noon."

With a bow Montezuma turned away and rejoined his friends, again offering his arm to the lady, and remarking pleasantly:

"Now we will seek a refreshment *salon*."

Half an hour after a pleasant party sat down to a gorgeous supper in one of the private *salons*—a party invited by Andrea Angelos and his still beautiful wife, who, years before, had so ably aided Merle in his escape from death at Havana.

When Montezuma removed his helmet, as the others did their masks, he was presented to Captain Arthur Grenville and his wife, and then to Captain Wilber Sebastian and Mildred. A moment after Rosal Abercrombie, his wife, and Brainard Abercrombie entered, and met the now famous Mexican—all having been invited to the supper by Andrea Angelos, the billionaire expressing a desire to meet those whose homes he had purchased excepting Lucien Bethune, whom he was to meet in a very different way in the morning.

As I have referred to the changes which time had, or had not, made upon the gentlemen of my romance, I should not of course slight the ladies.

As for Rena Angelos, she had developed into a matronly lady of thirty-six, who, though moving in the aristocratic circle of society, cared more for her lovely home, which she had so nearly lost, and her son and daughter, than she did for a gay life.

Helen Brainard that was, now Mrs. Rosal Abercrombie, was strangely well preserved for a woman on the shady side of fifty, for she still kept the grace and beauty of her form, and her face, with the aid of *cosmetiques*, as her hair with dye, affected youth; but neither hair-dye, paint and powder would hide a certain shadow and expression, that her life had been a mistake.

Estelle, who had sought and won Arthur Grenville, still defied Time, and looked little like a woman in her thirty-seventh year—few would have believed her more than thirty, for in some magic way she concealed the ravages time will make in beauty.

She had lived a gay life since her marriage, affected devotion to card-playing, and frequently won, from her friends, large sums, but lost in the end more than she had won.

Between her husband and herself existed only a show of courtesy, for long since, he had discovered that she did not love him, and that he had been mistaken in her character; but she was his wife, and that was a sacred name in his sight, and had been the mother of his boy, who had died in his seventh year, and carried the sunshine of Arthur Grenville's life into the grave with him.

Brainard Abercrombie was the especial pet of Mrs. Grenville, and she made use of him for balls, the opera, and a drive, when her husband could not attend her, and though the world and gossip got their heads together about this intimacy of the lady with a man younger than herself, the husband saw nothing wrong in it; a true man himself he could not doubt his wife.

And Mildred?

Mildred Monteith who had married Wilber Sebastian, because it was "fashionable to marry," and her friends had urged it—Mildred, who had been so nearly sacrificed to Merton Ainslie, and had been sacrificed to Wilber Sebastian—whose love had been with Merle—whose heart held a grave in it, had kept her vow; before the world, Wilber Sebastian was her husband; but in her heart she detested him, and kept him aloof, until he really feared his beautiful and haughty wife.

He was proud of her, had full control of her property, and yet he feared to raise the volcano he knew was slumbering away back in her beautiful blue eyes.

If Mildred was lovely as a fairy at sixteen, she was transcendently so as a woman in her thirties; only there was a dreamy sadness in her eyes, a far-away look, as though she dwelt ever in the past upon a hidden sorrow—as if the phantoms of a bygone love ever fettered her life.

Her form was fuller, and she carried herself with a haughty dignity and grace that made her a queen among women, and as Montezuma bent low before her and offered his arm to lead her to the table, but one thought was in every mind—except Wilber Sebastian's—that those two seemed intended by Nature for each other.

Once Mildred looked straight into the eyes of Montezuma, and her face paled and then flushed; but from that moment her manner seemed to undergo a change, and she charmed all by her wit and *repartee* as the merry party sat at

table, enjoying the delicacies placed before them, and drank toasts in the priceless wine.

All were charmed with Montezuma and showed it openly, while Mildred remarked:

"Mr. Montezuma, I do not regret the sale of my old home, now that I know you, and I feel you will be a princely host; but it did bring the tears to my eyes to sign the deed, and I desired to refuse at the last moment and assert my woman's rights; but Captain Sebastian would never have recovered the shock, I know; he is devoted to business, and such a speculation lost would have killed him."

As pleasantly as this was said, Montezuma thought he detected a vein of sarcasm in the reference to her husband, and he replied:

"As a business man, my dear madame, Captain Sebastian was perfectly right to accept my offer, for I have a habit of buying what I wish at any price. Did you address me, Mr. Angelos?"

"Pardon, Mr. Montezuma, but a servant brings the card of the irrepressible Don Felipe. As a friend of Alden's I expect he is to act for him, too," and Andrea Angelos seemed worried, while the ladies turned pale. They knew of the duel to be fought in the morning, and now here was another crowding upon it. Could Montezuma escape injury, or death, in meeting two such dangerous antagonists as Lucien Bethune and Otis Alden were known to be?

"As the affair was a public one, perhaps the ladies will excuse my asking Don Felipe in here?" said Montezuma, with one of his fascinating smiles.

The consent was readily granted, and Don Felipe Cosala entered, with a smile of apology on his dark face.

"A thousand pardons, my dear sir, but I am again a bird of ill omen. It seems, because I have had some little experience in affairs of honor, I am selected by my friends to act for them," and Don Felipe bowed to those present, all of whom he knew well.

"No apologies, Don Cosala; be seated and have a glass of wine, and then you can arrange with my friend Angelos, as before, and—Captain Grenville, is it asking too—"

"By no means, sir; I will willingly aid you," said Arthur Grenville; for not knowing what experience Andrea Angelos had had in such matters, he was most anxious to see that Montezuma had fair play in every respect, for he had taken a wonderful fancy to him.

"And my friend desires the services of Captain Sebastian," said Don Felipe, glancing toward that gentleman.

Wilber Sebastian seemed embarrassed, and looked at Montezuma, who quickly said:

"Serve your friend, Captain Sebastian, for it certainly cannot alter our friendship, so opportunely begun. Now, Don Cosala, have a glass of wine, for we are really rendering the ladies nervous."

Don Felipe drank several glasses of the iced champagne, and then excusing himself, with Captain Grenville, Wilber Sebastian and Andrea Angelos retired to another part of the room to arrange the meeting, leaving the four ladies to the care of Montezuma and Brainard Abercrombie.

Seemingly unconscious of the nature of what the four men at the window were discussing in a low tone, Montezuma charmed the ladies by his brilliant conversation, and the presence of Andrea Angelos at his side did not alter a muscle in his marble face.

"Pardon me, but at what time?" asked the Cuban.

The reply was pleasantly given:

"You know I have got to kill Dr. Bethune at sunrise; make it fifteen minutes after—same place," was the reply in a low tone, but all heard it.

"And weapons?" asked Andrea Angelos.

Montezuma shrugged his shoulders indifferently, and the Cuban turned away.

A moment after the four gentlemen approached the table again, and Don Felipe, after another glass of wine, took his departure to tell Otis Alden the weapons were pistols, and that he had better practice all night long, for Montezuma was a dangerous antagonist to meet.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LION'S PAW.

UPON returning to his hotel Montezuma found the faithful Valik awaiting him, and his *valet*, a Persian, asleep upon the floor.

But at the sound of his master's step, Mezrak, the *valet*, sprang to his feet and was ready to attend him.

"Valik, while Mezrak helps me off with this trumpery, you get out my Turkish rapiers and gray, dueling-pistols; I wish them in perfect order," said Montezuma, calmly.

In an hour's time he had taken a bath, sipped a cup of black coffee, prepared for him by Mezrak, and written several letters.

Then he turned to the table upon which was a box containing half a dozen pairs of single-barreled dueling-pistols of different sizes.

They were of the very finest make, wholly unornamented, and of a dull, grayish steel, which gave no reflection as an object to attract the fire of an antagonist.

The box was rosewood, silk-lined, and held every appurtenance for use in an affair of honor, a surgeon's case of tools, with bottles of chloroform, ether, and lint, not forgetting a canteen of water and sponge, while a flask of brandy occupied a conspicuous place.

In fact, it was a model dueling case, and upon the top were straps for swords, which gave the duelist a choice of weapons.

Whatever magnificence Montezuma might display in everything else, he certainly was exceedingly plain in his weapons of offense and defense.

Carefully he looked over the pistols, and then the swords, and a peculiar smile crossed his face as he laid them down, while he muttered:

"This is the beginning of the end."

A few moments he sat in silence, yet it did not seem painful meditation, and then a knock came at his door, and Mezrak ushered in Captain Grenville and Andrea Angelos.

"Good-morning, gentlemen! Mezrak, some coffee here," and Montezuma grasped a hand of each.

"You are ready, I see," said Andrea Angelos.

"Yes, always am—never make any one wait for me, and never wait for any one. My carriage will be at the door soon."

After a hasty cup of coffee the three gentlemen left the room, Valik following with the dueling-case, and both Captain Grenville and Andrea Angelos observed with calm surprise that Mezrak, although knowing the doubly deadly mission his master was going on, asked him coolly at what hour he should have breakfast.

"At nine o'clock, sharp, and these gentlemen will return with me; so go down on board the Zulah and bring back with you some of that Persian breakfast wine."

"He certainly does not dread the meeting as much as we do," said Captain Grenville, in a low tone to the Cuban.

"No; I never saw a man with such mastery of himself; he is wonderful, and gives me perfect confidence in him."

When seated in the carriage, the new purchase of Montezuma's, and rolling rapidly out to the well-known dueling-ground, where so many brave men have gone to see the sun rise or set for the last time on earth, Captain Grenville remarked:

"I am very sorry, Senor Montezuma, that your advent to our city is made gloomy by such affairs as these on hand."

"They are not gloomy to me, I assure you, Captain Grenville; they were not of my seeking, yet could have been avoided had I so willed; but I think that in each case I acted as any man should have done: I protected the weak against the strong and brutal."

"And you are making a lion of yourself by it, senor," said Andrea Angelos.

"Then Fate so wills that the lion should crush those two men with his paw. I am on the stream of Destiny, senores, in an open boat, and I do not stretch forth my hand to guide my course; I merely obey the stern commands of Fate who holds the helm. I see we are first up on the field."

"Yes; but here come the others," and as Montezuma and his seconds dismounted from their carriage, three other vehicles drove up, followed by a score of gentlemen upon horseback.

"We have a fair looker on in Venice," said Captain Grenville, with a smile, pointing to a distant rise of ground upon which sat a fair equestrienne, veiled, and robed in gray.

"If it were a less deadly entertainment it would be but courtesy to invite her attendance," said Montezuma.

"I doubt if she would come; she appears to think

"Distance lends enchantment to the view,"

and seems ready to dash away at full speed at the slightest approach on our part," returned Andrea Angelos, and he turned from the lady on horseback to the stern duty before him.

In the meantime Otis Alden, Lucien Bethune, their seconds, and those whom curiosity, or friendly interest had brought to the field, had dismounted, and were ranging themselves beneath the wide-spreading live-oaks that dotted the noted field of honor.

With the nonchalance of a veteran, Don Felipe Cosala went to work with the arrangements, Wilber Sebastian having been also invited as his *aide* with Lucien Bethune.

Saluting Montezuma pleasantly, he approached Captain Grenville and Andrea Angelos.

"Senores, I have a case there that may be of use; it is at the service of your principals as well as myself. Valik, my dueling case for these gentlemen."

"Nothing could be better, Senor Montezuma; I must have one made exactly like it, with your permission; but you have the instruments, yet not the surgeon," said Don Felipe, with a smile.

"I make it a rule never to need the services of such a personage, Don Felipe; the surgical instruments I bring for the use of my opponents."

There was no braggadocio in the remark; it was simply the cool reply of one who was confident of his own power.

"The rapiers, and also the pistols are so much superior to any I ever saw before, we will use them. It is generous in the Senor Montezuma to give a foe the use of one of these gray pistols, with no mark on it to attract an aim. Otis's pistols have ivory handles, and are gold-mounted; these are splendid," said Don Felipe, admiringly.

In the meantime, Montezuma was the cynosure of all eyes, even Otis Alden and Lucien Bethune glancing furtively at him from under their brows, and mentally cursing him for his utter indifference to the danger he was to face, for no one could observe that he, in the very slightest degree, showed that he was interested in the deadly preparations of the seconds.

With a cigar between his lips, and a gold-headed ratan in his hand, he leant against a tree, apparently enjoying the early morning scene, and listening tranquilly to the singing birds.

He was dressed in a suit of dark gray flannel, and wore a soft hat of the same hue as his clothes, while his cuff-buttons were single rubies of immense size, and a ruby pin, a perfect gem, was in his immaculate shirt-front.

As he twisted his ratan in his hands, it was observed that it was not the same he had carried the day before, as in the gold top was a ruby, not a diamond.

"The Senor Montezuma will be *au fait* in all things, I see; he wears rubies on this red occasion," laughed Brainard Abercrombie, who was among the spectators.

"I believe both Alden and Bethune are doomed; the very ease of that man makes me feel so," said Louis Chandeaur, who had driven out in his carriage, accompanied by a friend.

As for the two men who were to meet Montezuma, they were both deadly pale.

They had both been on that field before, and they had both left there a dead foe; but now they were to meet a man whom they felt to be their equal, if not their superior.

Knowing how splendidly Lucien Bethune handled a sword, Otis Alden felt more at ease, as he hoped that Montezuma would meet his match before he had to meet him, and the doctor would have felt much better had his friend been first on the list to face the Mexican.

Of him as a shot or swordsman, they knew nothing; but his utter *sang froid* made them dread the worst, while that elegant dueling-case looked ominous indeed; hence they felt ill at ease, and found it difficult to hide their feelings beneath a mask of indifference.

At the same time that Andrea Angelos approached Montezuma, Don Felipe stepped up to Lucien Bethune.

"We are ready," was all that they said.

Montezuma bowed, threw aside his cigar, and drew off his coat—the act displaying his faultless, muscular form, broad shoulders and small waist—and handed it, with his ratan, kid gloves and hat, to Valik.

Lucien Bethune forced a laugh, threw aside his coat and hat, and received the rapier from the hands of Don Felipe, with a low word of caution.

Then the two men faced each other and their rapiers rung together.

Both, at a glance, every one saw were superb swordsmen; but it was with dread that Captain Grenville and Andrea Angelos watched the combat: Montezuma slowly gave ground from the first attack!

His spirits rising with the belief that he held the vantage in swordsmanship, Lucien Bethune put forth all his mighty energy and skill, and won applause from his friends, as step by step he forced back the mighty Montezuma.

Step by step had Montezuma gone back, until wholly free from the crowd, and then from his smiling lips came several words to his antagonist.

The effect was magical, and for an instant Lucien Bethune seemed to be unnerved, and Montezuma lost a chance to run him through; but, recovering nerve, as he felt himself able to deal with his enemy, and with tenfold more energy than he had before displayed, he began to press forward, forcing Montezuma to act wholly on the defensive.

Turning in his backward step, Montezuma moved back into the prescribed limits, and seemed now almost at the mercy of his antagonist, for his face was now calm, and his every effort seemed to be devoted to saving his life, while remarks of his inferior swordsmanship reached his ears.

But, suddenly there came a change; that sweet, fascinating smile rested upon the marble face, displaying the white even teeth beneath the dark mustache, and Lucien Bethune found himself confronting a tireless giant, and one who wielded a sword as he did not believe mortal man could wield it.

In vain was it that he exerted all his strength and skill, using every device in the art of fence known to him—his teacher was before him!

"What fools we all have been! He has been playing with Bethune as a cat with a mouse," cried Wilber Sebastian, and there seemed some joy in the knowledge.

Now was Lucien deadly pale, and several times his lips moved, as though to speak; but the eyes

of melted diamonds were upon him with a fascination that held him speechless, and striking down the rapier opposing him, Montezuma drove his own blade to the very hilt in the body of his foe.

Wrenching it forth he let the limp form fall to the ground, and tossed the weapon to Valik to wipe off.

Without a shadow on his face, and the smile still on his lips, he turned and walked away from the crowd, who flocked around the fallen man.

"You have killed him, senor," said Captain Sebastian, approaching.

"I meant to do so," was the cool rejoinder of the utterly unmoved man.

It was now with a great dread at his heart that Otis Alden felt he must face this "magnificent devil," as he called him.

His hope that Lucien Bethune would kill him had faded away entirely, and he now dreaded death would be his portion.

But, evil as had been his life, he had nerve, and took his stand quietly, ten minutes after the fall of his friend.

"Ten paces is the distance, Senor Montezuma," said Andrea Angelos, approaching.

"It is well, but five would have been better; who has the word, Angelos?"

"I have, senor."

"Do me the favor, as soon as I speak to Alden, which I intend to do, to immediately give the word."

Andrea Angelos looked surprised, but replied: "Assuredly, senor; we are ready."

The two principals now took their stand, and the breathless crowd stood some paces off awaiting another death scene to be enacted there.

At a little distance off lay the dead body of Lucien Bethune, where both men could see it, and be reminded of the uncertainty of life; and upon the hillside, a hundred paces away, sat the motionless form on horseback, her eyes riveted upon the two men.

Without a movement she had witnessed the sword combat—now she was gazing upon an encounter that must prove equally deadly.

"Senor, would it not be well to button your coat over that ruby and shirt-front? Otis Alden has a quick and deadly eye," whispered Captain Grenville.

Montezuma, who had resumed his coat and hat and drawn on his immaculate kid gloves, made no reply; he merely smiled his thanks.

"Gentlemen, are you ready?"

Andrea Angelos had been a soldier, and he had a good voice, that rung distinct and clear.

"Though an *outré* act, senores, I would like to speak one word to Monsieur Alden."

All were surprised at the request; but as the principal did not refuse, the seconds granted permission.

Stepping quickly forward, Montezuma said half a dozen words to Otis Alden, who started with surprise.

Ere he could speak, Montezuma was again in his place, and facing him, the same smile upon his lips.

But Otis Alden was deadly pale, and involuntarily stepped back from those burning eyes, while, before the word, he fired.

A cry burst from every lip, and all eyes turned upon Montezuma.

But he stood like a statue—calm, and unhurt.

"Back to the mark, sir, or I will shoot you down!" sternly cried Andrea Angelos, springing toward Otis Alden, from whose nerveless hand the pistol dropped.

Seeing his double danger Otis Alden again stepped upon the line, and instantly Andrea Angelos cried:

"Fire! One! tw—"

The arm of Montezuma was quickly raised, and as the pistol reached its level, there followed the report.

Otis Alden sprang into the air, and was a corpse ere he touched the ground: the bullet had pierced his heart.

Tossing the smoking pistol to Valik, Montezuma walked away and stepped into his carriage, just as the woman on horseback dashed away from the hill top.

"Let us follow and see who she is," cried several voices, but a word from Brainard Abercrombie checked their curiosity upon the spot.

"She is doubtless a friend of the Senor Montezuma; take warning."

It was advice they at once followed; curiosity was one thing, but being responsible to Montezuma for it was quite another.

As Valik was collecting the weapons Rosal Abercrombie approached the carriage and congratulated Montezuma upon his safety, adding:

"It was despicable in Alden to fire before the word; but I hoped, for the sake of his young wife, you would spare him, as he had missed you."

"I never spare a foe, Monsieur Abercrombie—I am merciless; and you mistake—he did not miss me," and Montezuma coolly held up his arm, through the fleshy part of which the bullet had passed.

Instantly the cry arose that Montezuma was wounded—had been shot through the arm before he had sent the bullet through the heart of Otis Alden, and accordingly the mighty Mex-

can become more of a lion, a lion whose velvet paw had just clawed the life out of two of the most dangerous *citoyens* of New Orleans.

Joined by his seconds, Montezuma was driven rapidly back to his hotel, where his slight wound was dressed, after which he sat down with Arthur Grenville and Andrea Angelos to enjoy a delightful *dejeuner*, washed down by the Persian wine he had ordered, while through the city flew the news of the fatal duels of the herculean Apollo.

CHAPTER XXII.

MONTENZUMA AT HOME.

WHEN Montezuma told Andrea Angelos that he wanted his palatial mansion ready in two weeks' time, he meant it, and the Cuban banker had seen enough of the Mexican to know that he expected his wishes as well as his commands to be obeyed to the letter.

Why he had bestowed such favors upon him, Andrea Angelos could not tell; but, certain it was that Montezuma had saved him from ruin and made his fortune besides, for as soon as it was known that the banker had promptly paid his notes, taken the mortgages off of his property, and paid his bills, people no longer felt any doubt of the solidity of his banking-house, and depositors flocked in, many of them withdrawing from the house of Abercrombie, Sebastian & Company, whose three members certainly lived a very fast life and spent a great deal of money.

As soon as Andrea Angelos got possession of the three mansions bought by Montezuma, he set regiments of men to work upon the improvements, and in an incredibly short time the Grenville house came down; then followed the Bethune residence, delayed a day on account of the funeral, and up went the brick wall around the inclosure, excepting the Sebastian mansion, before the front of which was placed an elegant iron fence, through which glimpses could be obtained by the passers-by, of the grounds and gardens.

Upon these latter workmen were engaged, laying out flower-beds, building arbors, grottoes, fairy-bowers, and placing costly marble urns, statuary and vases of bronze, filled with rare exotics.

The stables meantime were torn down and rebuilt in a twinkling, and rooms and bay-windows, were added to the mansion, together with bowling-alleys, billiard and card-rooms, and rifle and pistol galleries.

In fact, so much did gold do, that within two weeks from the day of the double duel, the furniture was moved into what was now nothing less than a palace.

And such furniture!

A combination of the voluptuous luxury of Oriental lands, with the magnificent comforts of Paris—tables of the rarest mosaic, divans of silk and velvet—chairs of ebony, rosewood, and silvered and gilded in the most artistic manner—curtains of lace and velvet, each worth a fortune—carpets that gave back no sound to the heaviest heel—rugs of priceless value, and bed-chamber sets such as only monarchs could rest upon.

Then any quantity of *bric-a-brac* scattered lavishly around; a picture-gallery filled with the most exquisite paintings—but none by the "old masters"—artistic drawings and rare engravings; then a saloon of statuary containing only the most costly works of art.

Mahogany stairways, red, white and blue marble hallways, and the ceilings throughout the mansion frescoed by the best artists, whom large sums of gold made work with lightning hand, and sharpened genius.

"And the dining-room?" I hear my hungry readers ask.

A *salon*, in which one could wish that dinner would last as did Rip Van Winkle's sleep.

The panels were beautiful paintings, set in—hunting and fishing scenes, with strings of game between that looked as though they could be taken down for use.

A carpet of velvet on the floor—a table of ebony, inlaid with gold and silver designs, and an entire service of solid gold, all engraved with the name of Montezuma.

The china was of the rarest kind, and the forks were of gold and the knife-handles of the same precious metal.

Then there was a curiosity room, in which were the gatherings of Montezuma in different parts of the world.

Into this marvelous palace at last filed the servants—Nubians and Persians in the picturesque costumes of their country—for Montezuma liked not native servants, and upon his departure, the day of the duel, in his yacht for the Lake shore, he had presented the Senora Angelos with the turnout he had bought from Wilber Sebastian, throwing in the coachman, too, who certainly was not sorry, as Valik had filled him with a holy horror "of dat Massa Mexikum Prince, Mon'zummar," for such the negro *cocher* called him.

The day that the palace was ready for the reception of its master, Montezuma returned in his yacht, and drove at once to his home, as though he had always lived there, Andrea An-

gelos accompanying him, and a crowd of idlers thronging the streets to see him go by.

"I hope all will be as you like it," said the banker, as the two dismounted from a turnout, carriage, horses and Persian driver, for surpassing the elegant affair which Wilber Sebastian had so prided himself upon.

"All is as I like it; it could not be better. Now put all the workmen on board my largest vessel, the *Launcelot*, and send them at once to my lake-side estate; here is my plan of improvements, Senor Angelos," and Montezuma handed the banker drawings he had made himself.

"And, by the way, as you have doubtless drawn heavily upon my deposit with you, I wish, now that I have my safe ashore, to give you more funds."

"But, Senor Montezuma, I have not spent one-half yet—"

"It is best always to have a full purse, and heavy bank account, friend Angelos. Valik, hand to the senor thirty millions more, in money."

"Thirty millions more?"

It was all that Andrea Angelos could say, or rather exclaim.

"Yes, Senor Angelos—no, hold, Valik! Senor Angelos, it is my intention to both *bull* and *bear* the financial market of your city, and, as I shall need a very heavy sum of money to do so, I wish—"

"Your kindness, Senor Montezuma, has so raised my credit that I can easily borrow any sum you might—"

"You misunderstand me, my dear Angelos; I say that as I need a large sum in cash, for I have a deep purpose in some transactions I intend entering upon, I will let you use the money already deposited with you for improvements on my lake estate, and personal expenses, and place in your hands—let me see! I think a hundred millions, will do to start upon. Valik, carry one hundred millions, in French and English bank-notes, down to the office of the Senor Angelos."

As Andrea Angelos made no reply, Montezuma smilingly added:

"You see that Valik is my home banker; he carries the keys to all my treasures."

Still Andrea Angelos made no remark; he sat like one astounded by startling news.

Could he believe his ears?

If not, he could his eyes, as they turned upon Valik counting out the packages of money, and yet leaving behind what appeared as much more.

Who was this man of gold and diamonds?

This man who spent a million dollars as he, Andrea Angelos, did a hundred?

This man who had proven himself superhuman in personal strength, and had faced death with a smile upon his face that would have won any woman's heart!

Was he man—or was he the devil himself, wearing the image of a man, and handling counterfeit gold and notes made in the realms of Hades?

Whatever he was, man or devil, he certainly had befriended him, and he was with him, body and soul.

Such were the thoughts of Andrea Angelos as he sat in almost a stupor before Montezuma.

"Now, senor, we will have lunch, and then the workmen must get off at once, for I wish my house on the lake run through with the same dispatch that this has been."

"It shall be, Senor Montezuma; before I saw you I had no idea what power gold held in the world, although I deemed it all powerful; you have astounded our citizens, senor."

It was a lunch such as Andrea Angelos had never sat down to before, and he partook of wines that had mellowed for more than a century of years.

Then he departed on his duty, filled with the energy of the man he served, and at sunset the A. No. 1 full-rigged ship *Launcelot* sailed for the Lake shore, the bark *Zulah* following in her wake, with the furniture, servants, carriages and horses intended for Montezuma's country-seat.

Two days after Montezuma was established in his city palace one thousand invitations were sent out to the *creme de la creme* of the city aristocracy, to attend a ball to be given by the Mexican *billionaire* in his elegant abode.

The invitations were solid gold, and upon them, in artistic lettering, was engraved:

"MONTEZUMA, OF MEXICO,

"Desires the pleasure of your company

"AT HIS MANSION,

"Thursday evening, at 9 o'clock."

All who received one of these invitations considered themselves blest among the blessed, and immediately set to work to prepare costumes suitable for the momentous occasion—those who had money sparing no expense and spending freely—those who had no money borrowing freely of those who had, and those who had no friends to borrow from, getting the pawn-brokers to act a friendly part—for a consideration—and advance on jewels and other personal effects which they could spare from the make-up of their wardrobes.

And in his palace, Montezuma calmly awaited the coming event when his rooms would be crowded, well knowing that the old saying would be proven true: "*Plus on est de fous, plus on rit.*" (The more fools, the more fun.)

CHAPTER XXIII.

FOILED.

THE Montezuma ball was given, and all who had been invited were there, with the exception of a few who had died after the invitations were sent out, and who, the gossips said, died with intense regret at being unable to attend.

The Mexican Prince, as sycophants would call him, received his guests with the dignified and courtly grace natural to him, and Andrea Angelos and his lovely wife aided him in the reception ceremonies. All were charmed, not only with Montezuma, but with his palace and its appointments, its Persian servants, and, above all, with the luxuries and wines upon which as they feasted their stomachs, after feasting their eyes upon the beauties of the lion's den, and the majesty of the lion.

From her first meeting with Montezuma, the fair Madame Grenville had determined to lay siege to his heart, and so she managed to have Brainard Abercrombie leave her upon the arm of the elegant host, and her dreamy eyes lighted up with envy and hope as she turned them upon his evening dress.

He was attired in plain black, wearing a vest cut low, that revealed an exquisitely-embroidered shirt-bosom, in which burned a single opal of imperial size and beauty, and yet matched by those in his wristbands, and the one in a ring on the little finger of his left hand.

Upon his left breast glittered a star of diamonds, in the center of which was an anchor of rubies; and that it was some foreign decoration all knew, yet none cared to ask him what.

As Estelle glided through the thronged room, she thought:

"Ah, if I could only make this man my slave, how happy would I be."

And with such intention she set to work, using every artifice known to an artful woman.

Presently the two came upon Captain Sebastian and his wife.

The eyes of Montezuma at once fell upon the toilet of Mildred—a carnation velvet, sweeping far back, and the waist *decollete*, while around her neck she wore the diamond necklace, already known to the reader, upholding the anchor of rubies.

Through the heavy masses of her hair was fastened the gem-bilted dagger, and upon her finger was the priceless ring—the single diamond.

At a glance Montezuma saw the fortune she wore in precious stones, and said pleasantly:

"It may be bad taste, Madame Sebastian, to speak of your exquisite gems, but I am such an admirer of them I cannot refrain from it; if you care to, I will show you some of my treasures."

Ere Mildred could reply Don Felipe Cosala approached, his beautiful Mexican wife upon his arm; they had come late and were seeking the host.

Montezuma received them with his accustomed courtly grace, and then Estelle cried:

"Don Cosala, you and the senora are just in time, for the Senor Montezuma was going to show us some of his treasures, and I know he will include you."

"Certainly, and with pleasure. You will have to come to my own private rooms, though," and he led the way, Estelle upon his arm, and followed by the four others.

Of course the private apartment of so great a personage had first to be inspected by the ladies, and, in the meantime, Montezuma had called Valik to bring him a casket, which the slave unlocked.

So intent were all at the display of wealth within, that Don Cosala's penetrating glance at the jewels worn by Mildred was not observed.

His eyes fairly blazed, and his swarthy face flushed; but he controlled his emotion, and glanced within the casket.

There he saw gems of all kinds, many of them worth a fortune, and the value of all seemingly beyond the power of man to compute.

But his eyes again turned upon Mildred, and he said, quietly:

"Those gems of yours, Mrs. Sebastian, are also priceless; I never saw you wear them before."

"No, Don, this is the first time I ever knew her to wear them, excepting the ring, and do you know there is some mystery about them, I think?" said Wilber Sebastian.

"Around most precious stones hangs a mystery, Captain Sebastian; we know not who has worn them before, whence they have come, how often they have been stolen, or what blood has been shed to gain them," said Montezuma, in his deep, quiet tones.

"True, senor, but would you believe that I never knew my wife had these priceless jewels until to-night?"

"Indeed, Captain Sebastian, there does certainly seem to be a mystery attached to them," said Don Felipe, and he added:

"These very gems, I could almost swear, or some strangely like, even to the dagger in your hair, madame, I have seen before."

"Indeed, Don Cosala, and where, pray?" asked Mildred.

"It is a story of interest, if I will be permitted to tell it."

"Assuredly, Don Felipe; be seated, please," and Montezuma motioned to all to sit down.

"It is now many years ago, just before I was Governor of the Castle San Juan de Uloa, that I frequently played for high stakes, and one evening met a young man who was sailing under false colors, I found out afterward, as he was none other than Merle the Mutineer."

"I have heard of him, Don; whatever became of him?" asked Montezuma, while all present, excepting the Senora Cosala, started, and turned pale. The Don was coming painfully near home, yet did not seem to know it, and continued:

"I played a game with him for a large stake and he lost, and after an hour I had won all his money; then he placed that ring—no, lady, one like it—upon the table against what I had won, and he lost that, too; but, to my surprise, he then drew forth a necklace and ruby cross, the *fac-simile* of those you wear, Mrs. Sebastian, and against them I agreed to stake the ring and all I was worth, which was considerable."

"To my horror, luck had changed, and the young man won."

"The next day I ascertained that he was Merle, the Mutineer, and learned that he was arrested, tried as a buccaneer, and sentenced to death."

"And was he executed?" asked Mildred, in tense tones.

"He was; I saw him die in the Castle San Juan de Uloa. Now tell us, Mrs. Sebastian, how you obtained those priceless jewels, for indeed we are all interested to know," said Don Felipe.

"They were sent to me by a friend—one whom I loved most dearly. I have had them many years, and the direst poverty would never make me part with them," and Mildred spoke with considerable feeling.

"I am sorry to hear you say so, Mrs. Sebastian, for I was going to ask you to select from my casket any gems you are pleased to take in exchange for all you wear. In fact, I intended to offer double, ay, treble their value, for I like them," said Montezuma.

Mildred's face flushed; but she answered, quietly, looking Montezuma straight in the eyes:

"I regret, senor, that I cannot oblige you, but these I wear have more value in my eyes than your entire casket."

"I offer the casket and all it contains, Mrs. Sebastian, for the gems you wear," was the cool response.

All started in surprise; there was a hundred times the value of Mildred's gems in the casket; would she refuse?

Wilber Sebastian was nearly crazy, though outwardly calm, fearing Mildred would refuse, and Don Felipe watched her with interest most intense, while his wife and Estelle were nervous almost to fainting.

The only calm ones were Montezuma and Mildred.

"You seem to value my gems most highly, senor," said Mildred.

"I admire them immensely, lady; and, as you have had cause to know, when I purchased your home, I generally get that which I wish, independent of what may be the price. Do you accept my offer, lady?"

"I am sorry to disappoint you, Senor Montezuma, but I decline, with heartfelt thanks, your generous offer."

A groan came from the lips of Wilber Sebastian—he could not suppress it, and all bent forward with interest, while Montezuma smiled—one of those strangely sweet, fascinating smiles that made his face really beautiful and womanly.

"Lady, I dislike to be foiled. Valik!"

The slave appeared, and Montezuma spoke to him a few words in his own language, and he walked away, as though sent on an errand.

"Senor Montezuma, where did you get that splendid slave? He reminds me of one I saw, years ago," said Don Felipe.

"I found him on our coast, sir, and attached him to me, for, in my travels I had learned to speak his tongue. He was wrecked, he told me."

Ere more was said Valik returned, and placed before his master a casket of twice the size of the one he had just offered Mildred.

"Lady," began Montezuma, in his evenly modulated tones, "here is a treasure that I think will tempt you. The shield I had at the Carnival Ball is here, and many other rare gems, some of them alone of more value than all you wear."

As he spoke he threw up the lid, and all were dazzled by the splendor, as the rays of the light fell upon the interior of the velvet and silk-lined casket.

"Lady, I offer you this casket, and all it contains, for your gems."

"Again I thank you, Senor Montezuma, and—decline."

"Both caskets, lady?"

"Again I decline. The gems I wear cannot be bought or exchanged."

A strange light came into the eyes of Montezuma, and he said in a deprecating tone:

"I am foiled; and, as it is a new sensation for me, permit me to offer you each one a souvenir of the occasion. Mrs. Sebastian, your hand, please?"

Mildred's face flushed and then paled; but she held forth her hand, and upon the first finger Montezuma slipped a ring containing a single ruby—a stone larger than the diamond she wore.

Then, ere the others had time for surprise, the Senora Cosala and Estelle also received rubies fully as priceless as the one given Mildred.

"Nor shall you be forgotten, senors," and Don Felipe Cosala and Wilber Sebastian were presented with ruby sleeve buttons worth a fortune.

"Now we will return below stairs," and Montezuma again offered his arm to Estelle, and led the way to the refreshment *salon*, leaving Valik to look after the caskets.

When Montezuma retired to rest, after his guests had departed, he muttered four words:

"Foiled by a woman!"

With that thought he sunk into a pleasant slumber.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"A BEGGAR ON HORSEBACK."

THE morning following his entertainment, Montezuma arose at his accustomed hour, took his perfumed bath, and ordered Mezrak to send Monsieur Ellis Monette to him.

In a few moments that gentleman entered, and was waved to a seat by Montezuma.

In the fine-looking, well-dressed young man who dropped down into an easy-chair, few, if any, could have recognized the poor beggar of the *Cafe Bourse*, who had caused the duel between Lucien Bethune and Montezuma.

"Mr. Monette, I believe you are now well and in good health?" began Montezuma.

"I am, sir, and I owe all to you," said the young man, earnestly.

"Yes, and I shall expect you to serve me as I direct."

"In any way that I can, sir."

"Now let us understand each other—your name is Ellis Monette, I believe?"

"It is, sir."

"Why did you change your name, may I ask?"

The young man started, and stammered out: "I d—d—do not—un—der—stand, sir."

"Then I shall explain; your true name is Ellison Monette Greyson."

"Oh, God, senor! how did you know this?" and the young man stretched out his hands imploringly.

"I will tell you more: your name of Ellison M. Greyson you changed to that of Ellis Monette; you are from Louisville, Kentucky, and come of a good family and a wealthy one."

"Your father had you educated for the law; but you preferred to be idle, forged his name to a check, and were found out; he would not hide your crime from the world, and you were sent to fill a felon's cell, from which you escaped six months ago by killing the keeper."

"Spare me, oh spare me! Senor Montezuma," groaned the unhappy man.

"Listen to me, sir; you killed your keeper and escaped; but this was not the worst of it. You needed gold, and with false keys entered your father's home by night, opened his iron safe, and took from it a large amount of money."

"As you turned to leave, your father came upon you. A scuffle followed, and you drove a knife into his side, inflicting a wound from which he died, after making known who was his murderer."

"Spare me, for the love of God!"

"Hear me, sir; you succeeded in getting away with your gold, and wandered about until at last you came to this city, where, one night on the *levee* you were knocked down and robbed of all you had."

"The blow made you ill, and you were taken care of by an old negress, into whose house you stumbled."

"At last you were able to go out, and you had to beg to keep from starving, so that the story you told in the *cafe* was a true one."

"Learning that Don Cosala was looking for you, and that Bethune intended doing you injury, I sent Valik to look you up, and you are now like a different man; but you look so much like yourself, Mr. Monette, as I shall call you, that you need a disguise, or you will be recognized, for there is a large reward for your return to Louisville."

"You do not intend to give me up then? Oh, senor, I will be your slave, your very slave. But, tell me—how did you know this of me?"

"It is all true, is it not?"

"Alas! yes, senor."

"I will tell you how I know it. A detective, who has been on your track, followed you into this mansion yesterday, and I gave him treble the reward offered for your apprehension, sent him off happy, and kept you to do some work for me."

"Senor Montezuma, God bless you; I am a

poor, guilty wretch, but I cannot die on the gallows as I deserve. No, no, let me live, and I will serve you all in my power."

"Well, monsieur, I am confident of that. Now I wish you to buy a place upon the Lake shore: the Grenville estate is for sale, I hear."

"Senor, I have only that which you gave me at the *Cafe Bourse*."

"Valik!"

The slave appeared and bowed low before his master.

"Give this gentleman a quarter of a million dollars."

Valik handed the package of bank-notes to the amazed young man, who could only stare at Montezuma.

"Mr. Monette, I wish you to first disguise yourself, as I told you. Your hair must be dyed white, and a gray beard must cover your face; you must walk with a gold-headed cane, affect to be a man of fifty—do you understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Be a man of sixty even, but a hale old fellow, fond of company, good dinners, horseback riding and yachting—in fact, a fine old English gentleman, for you must be an Englishman, who has come to America to settle."

"After you have your disguise complete, and your trunks of clothing packed, put up at the *Hotel Saint Louis*, register from England, and as Ellis Monette; then send for Abercrombie, Sebastian and Company, bankers, and deposit with them the money you have there, and give them to understand that you have much more to place in their hands."

"Also ask them to purchase for you a country place on the Lake shore, and be certain that you get the Grenville property—do you understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Then spare no expense in having your house and grounds fitted up, and after you have settled there make the acquaintance particularly of these people—make them your boon companions in fact; see, there are seven of them, and here are their names," and Montezuma handed a piece of paper to the young man, upon which were seven names.

"And then, Senor Montezuma?"

"I will inform you when the time comes, Ellis Monette, and if you refuse to obey I shall have you hung as a felon; if you obey I will leave in the hands of your bankers one million dollars to ease your conscience, and with it you can fly to Europe to live in luxury; but, mind you, make your guests drink all they will, but not one glass of wine shall you taste—do you understand?"

"Fully, sir, and shall obey you, be your orders what they may," firmly said the young man.

"I believe you; I am never mistaken in reading a face, and knew you as a rascal the moment I saw you, in spite of your rags; now go and seek your disguise, and let it be a good one, for your life depends upon it, and how you serve me."

Montezuma bowed pleasantly, and Ellis Monette left the mansion. Three days after a wealthy English gentleman, stopping at the *Hotel Saint Louis*, purchased the Grenville mansion and plantation on the Lake shore.

The beggar of the *Cafe Bourse* had mounted upon horseback.

CHAPTER XXV.

THUNDERBOLTS.

THE summer following the arrival of the great Montezuma in New Orleans, a select party of friends were invited for the season to his home on the Lake shore, for, as with his city mansion, he had made this retreat a very palace of beauty and luxury, and surrounded it with grounds that rivaled the Garden of Eden.

Of course, in the time that had gone by since he had come to the Crescent City, he had greatly added to his fame in many ways, one of which was in endowing a Cuban priest, the *Padre Facon*—whom he had met at the home of Andrea Angelos, who had known the worthy father in Cuba—with a considerable sum with which to establish a monastery of which he should be the *abbe*.

In charities his gifts had been many and large, and in a quiet way he had aided a number of deserving people, in business or otherwise, until he was looked upon as a general benefactor, while he paid most liberally for the work done for him, and had employed thousands in that work.

Some people feared that Montezuma, notwithstanding his elegant city and country palaces, would not always remain with them, for his ship and barque, the *Launcelot* and *Zulab*, still rode at anchor in the river, their crews on board, and his yacht, a perfect model of beauty, furnished with every luxury, and as fleet as a bird, lay in Lake Borgne, for he used it as a means of transportation between his country seat and New Orleans.

Now this party of friends, invited to the *Chateau d'Espagne*, as Montezuma had named his lake estate, was most select indeed, consisting of Captain Arthur Grenville and wife, the Abercrombies, Don Felipe and the Senora Vic-

torine, Wilber Sebastian and Mildred, and the Senora Rosa Angeles and her children, while Andrea ran over from time to time as he could spare the time from his business, which was now increasing greatly.

Montezuma's rooms were of delightful dimensions and magnificently furnished; the stables were full of carriages and horses, the cellar crowded with bottles of choice wines and liquors, the servants as attentive as they could be, and the view upon the Gulf unexcelled, while the park and grounds were a perfect Paradise of beauty, and ever filled with the perfume of rare flowers.

In the sheltered cove lay Montezuma's yacht, the Nemesis, and there were innumerable row and sail-boats, so that a more charming spot could not be found in which to pass the hot days of summer than the *Chateau d'Espagne*, and with such a host as was the Mexican *billionaire*.

Another elegant home on the shore, yet of course not to be compared with Montezuma's, was owned by an eccentric old English gentleman, a bachelor, who affected the society of gentlemen only, and was wont to give dinner-parties several times a week; but then he had an immense bank account with Abercrombie & Co., and could afford to be extravagant, and the gentlemen of the neighborhood were delighted that he was.

But though he was friendly to all, yet he had a few boon companions, who were constantly at his handsome home, which was formerly the Grenville estate, and many were the orgies they had together, though the Englishman never drank liquor or wine—he said his physicians had forbidden it; but he was ever urging his guests to make free with all upon his table, and in his mansion.

One day two bits of news fell like a thunder-bolt upon the Lake shore, and struck consternation to many hearts.

First, a small vessel dropped anchor in front of the *Chateau d'Espagne*, and two men came up to the mansion, and astounded every one by stepping up to Rosal Abercrombie, one of them saying in stern tones:

"Mr. Abercrombie, I arrest you in the name of the law."

Every one sprung to their feet, excepting the accused; he seemed almost paralyzed by the shock and was as pale as death.

But Montezuma stepped forward and asked calmly:

"Upon what charge, Mr. Officer, do you make this arrest?"

Upon the charge of *murder*, Senor Montezuma.

"Indeed! a severe charge, yet one which my friend must prove untrue; you have a warrant, of course, else I cannot permit my guest to be taken from beneath my roof."

The officer hastily produced the warrant of arrest upon the charge of murder, and Montezuma turned to his guest:

"Mr. Abercrombie, you must rouse yourself. To prove this charge untrue must now be your duty. Mr. Officer, will you accept me as surety for the appearance of Mr. Abercrombie in New Orleans?"

"I am sorry to refuse you, Senor Montezuma, but I have orders to bring him, dead or alive."

"Then obey your orders; but, Abercrombie, cheer up, for we will come over in the *Nemesis* and see that you get a fair trial."

"Oh, father! why do you not speak and prove this charge untrue?" cried Brainard Abercrombie, overwhelmed by distress, while Helen Abercrombie, she who had married this man because he had proven another guilty of murder in the long ago, sat like a statue, her eyes staring—her face as white as marble.

"Come, Mr. Abercrombie, we must hasten to return," said the officer.

"Monsieur, Mr. Abercrombie, I pledge you my word, shall be ready for you when you leave, but you, and your comrades on your vessel, must first partake of my hospitality. In two hours' time you can set sail, and I can talk over this painful matter with my friend."

The officers were not at all unwilling to partake of the chateau hospitalities, and left their prisoner to the care of Montezuma, who made himself responsible for him.

In the specified time the lugger set sail, bearing upon it Rosal Abercrombie, in irons, and his wife and son, who had refused Montezuma's invitation to run them over in the yacht, preferring to accompany the utterly prostrated prisoner, who, since his arrest, had not spoken a word.

"I will leave Captain Grenville to act as host, and Sebastian and myself will follow soon in the yacht; but I may be delayed, as I promised our English friend, Mr. Monette, to take him to the Balize, where he could catch an outward bound vessel, as he has important business calling him abroad," Montezuma had said, at parting with the Abercrombies on the lugger, and on board of which he had sent everything to make them comfortable during the voyage.

An hour after the *Nemesis* hoisted sail, and with Montezuma and Wilber Sebastian on board, ran down toward the pier opposite the villa of Mr. Ellis Monette, while Don Felipe and Captain Grenville, with their wives, and Mil-

dred and the Senora Angeles still remained at the chateau, Montezuma promising to return as soon as possible.

Running in close, Montezuma said that he would go up to the mansion after Mr. Monette, and was accordingly rowed to the pier.

In a few moments he ascended the broad steps of the piazza, and was met at the door by an old gentleman, who, the reader is aware, was none other than Ellis Monette in disguise.

"They are all here, Senor Montezuma," said the supposed old man.

"The five jurymen, the district attorney and the sheriff?"

"Yes, sir; the seven."

"Very well; now call the attorney and get him to make a deed of sale, as I purchase this place from you, and the others can all witness it. I suppose that you have given out that you were called away, and intended selling?"

"Yes, senor."

"And your servants?"

"Are all paid off and making merry in the kitchen."

"Good! I shall stand back by the chateau and send one of my servants to take charge. Are you all ready?"

"I am, sir; I shall only carry a little baggage in my hand. My place I sell you intact," and Ellis Monette smiled.

In a few minutes more the attorney had drawn up the deed of sale, conveying to Montezuma the mansion and its surrounding acres, with all within the elegant house, for a certain large sum in cash, and those present, seven in number, witnessed the document.

"Now, gentlemen, a bumper all round; a last glass before I leave you," and Ellis Monette approached the sideboard and poured out nine silver goblets of wine.

The bumpers were dashed down, Ellis Monette, on this occasion joining with his guests, and Montezuma also drinking.

"Now, gentlemen, make yourselves at home. I wish to see the Senor Montezuma for a while," and the two left the dining-hall, the guests again drinking deeply.

Rapidly they wended their way down to the pier, were rowed on board the yacht, which went flying back toward the chateau dock.

Signaling for his head-servant to meet him, Montezuma, as the yacht stood close in shore, called out:

"I have bought Mr. Monette's estate. Send Meldiz over to take charge at once."

Then the fleet vessel headed out into the Gulf, while Montezuma paced the deck, a strange look upon his usually calm face.

In the meantime a strange scene was being enacted at the mansion on the shore—a scene that would freeze the very blood with horror.

Sheriff Winston, he who had arrested Launcelot Grenville for the murder of his brother, thirty-seven years before, and now an old man, had started to seek his host, when half an hour passed and he did not return.

As he arose to his feet he staggered badly, and his head went round until he nearly fell; but then he had been partaking freely of his host's good wine, and he thought nothing of it.

Reaching the door he placed his hand upon the knob, to start with surprise. His eyes fell upon a placard that occupied the entire panel above the lock.

A placard upon which he read with horror—while his cry of fright brought his companions around him—these words in large letters:

"LAUNCELOT GRENVILLE AVENGED."

"Thirty-seven years ago a jury of twelve men sat upon trial, and found guilty of murdering his brother,

"LAUNCELOT GRENVILLE, and the district attorney in his bitter speech, and the judge in his charge, all pronounced him a fratri-cide, and all else that was evil, and he was sentenced to die upon the gallows, and would have done so but for the love and faithfulness of an old negro, Dave, since gone to his rest.

"He whom they proved to have been murdered is now alive and well, showing that they acted wholly from bitterness toward the unfortunate prisoner, whose life was wrecked, even though he escaped death on the gallows.

"Five of those twelve jurymen are yet living, as also are the district attorney and the sheriff—seven in all who are doomed.

"The others are beyond revenge, for they lie in their graves.

"The mills of the gods grind slowly; But the grist is very fine."

"And after thirty-seven years, vengeance has come. You have drunk the cup of poison to the bitter dregs.

"Now, as death faces you, remember that Launcelot Grenville is avenged."

With eyes staring from their sockets the seven doomed men read the above remarkable placard, and the scene that followed beggars description.

They were old men, all beyond fifty, and yet they clung to life as a child would, and wail after wail of anguish burst from their white lips, as they felt that they must die, for already were the pangs of death gnawing at their vitals.

With frenzied strength they pulled at the door, but it refused to yield to their efforts; it was securely fastened.

Then they bounded to the windows and

smashed in the glass, to be met by a solid wall of iron.

Again they rushed to the door; it *must* yield to them, and with mad strength they dashed the solid table in pieces and used it as a means of breaking down the solid portal.

At last it began to yield, and their wild shrieks of delight mingled with their groans of pain; hope was before them; a doctor might, nay, *must* save them, for they were not fit to die.

Harder and harder their blows fell upon the oaken door, and at last it gave way and was torn from its hinges.

But, horror of horrors! *an iron door was beyond it!*

Like dead they fell to the floor; but their agony again brought them to their feet, and like mad wretches they shrieked for help!—help! to save them from death.

But no help came; their cries could not reach beyond those iron and padded walls; he who avenged Launcelot Grenville had laid his plans well.

Weaker and weaker grew their cries, and one by one they sunk down to die, yet still clinging to life with frantic despair.

At length the iron door swung open on its hinges, and he who entered started back in affright: it was Meldiz, the servant of Montezuma.

Quickly he called the servants still reveling in the kitchen, and the sight they saw sobered them all, and like startled deer they fled the place to spread the direful tidings.

Thus it was that Rosal Abercrombie, arrested for murder, and seven men poisoned to avenge Launcelot Grenville, fell like thunderbolts upon the inmates of the *Chateau d'Espagne*.

And then it was that all who had seen Ellis Monette, the pretended Englishman, had recognized in him none other than Launcelot Grenville himself—an old white-haired gray-bearded man, yet still Launcelot Grenville: to such mistakes do our fancies lead us!

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE TOILS TIGHTENING.

THE startling news, that had fallen like a stroke of lightning upon the people of the quiet Lake shore, in the arrest of Rosal Abercrombie for murder, and the death, by poisoning, of the seven survivors of the trial of Launcelot, in due time reached New Orleans, and set the excitable citizens wild, while many of them could not but admire the indomitable pluck and patience of the man who had so long bided his time for vengeance, as not one believed otherwise than that Ellis Monette, the pretended old Englishman, was none other than the fugitive, who, thirty-seven years before, had fled from the very gallows.

At length the *Nemesis* arrived in front of the Crescent City, having run around by the Chandeleur Islands, and entered the river by the South Pass.

With some show of surprise upon his marble face, Montezuma received the news, brought him by Andrea Angeles, as soon as he had driven to his city home.

First, he learned that he had aided, of course innocently all knew, Launcelot Grenville, *alias* Ellis Monette, to escape, after his terrible act of revenge, by putting him on board of an outward-bound vessel, which all knew it was useless to pursue to attempt his capture.

"This information is startling indeed, friend Angeles. Who would have suspected that pleasant old gentleman to be laying such a plot of revenge. All of them were dead, you say, when Meldiz arrived?"

"Every one of them, Senor Montezuma; but the placard on the door told the whole story of his revenge."

"And Captain Grenville—how bore he the news?"

"He was astounded beyond measure, and says he *knows* his brother Launcelot to be dead, and yet can form no idea as to who could have been the one to thus avenge him. In fact, every one, so says the news from the shore, lives in fear and trembling there. They know not what stroke may fall next."

"There is certainly some deep mystery at the bottom of all this; but now, to Rosal Abercrombie—what of him?"

"He is now in the city *carcel*, senor, and has been committed for trial, as the proofs are strong against him."

"What are the circumstances, Senor Angeles?"

"They go back thirty-six years, to the marriage of Mr. Abercrombie to Helen Brainard, his present wife.

"He was secretly married to a poor girl, it seems, whom he wished to get rid of to make Helen Brainard, the beauty and heiress, his wife, and made an attempt upon her life, which was frustrated by the girl's sister, whom Rosal Abercrombie killed with his knife, and made his escape.

"Strange to say, his wife placed the blame upon a burglar, who, she said, had entered the room of her sister and herself, and thus shielded her husband.

"After this she disappeared mysteriously, and a body found in the river was thought by her relatives to be hers; but it seems she was not dead, though anxious to be thought so, and had gone far away to live, where she would never more hear the name of her cruel husband, whom she loved with all her heart, in spite of what he had done.

"Before she went, however, she was impelled by some strange impulse, to write a full confession of her secret marriage, giving the name of the priest who had united them, and the church in which the ceremony was performed; also she made known the attempt on her life by her husband, and his having killed her sister.

"This confession she deposited in the city bank, to be kept until called for, and with her name upon it, and there it lies to this day, but will be demanded at the trial, as she holds the receipt for it, given to her by the gentleman who was cashier at that time. She says the knife with which the murder was committed, still stained with blood, and with the name of Rosal Abercrombie upon it, as also a handkerchief, also stained and bearing his name upon it, are rolled up in the confession, while the man who accompanied her husband on that fatal night, and who has been paid a salary of *hush money*, each year by the murderer, is in the city, and she can produce him at the trial."

"But why does this wife return at this late day, after all this time that has passed, to make charges against a man whom she would not inform against because she loved him?" asked Montezuma, with apparent interest.

"She says she was visited by a man, who sought her in her northern home, where, as a school-teacher, she had lived all these years, and that he told her she must not die with this sin upon her soul, of hiding a murderer from the law, and who made known to her that he was acquainted with the facts of her secret marriage, and knew the confederate of Rosal Abercrombie in the crime."

"But, who was this person that so interested himself in a murder committed nearly two-score years ago?"

"Ah! there is the mystery, senor; he was some implacable foe of Rosal Abercrombie, who, now that he has persuaded the woman to make known her story, has disappeared from view, leaving a polite note to the State's Attorney, that, as he has hunted Rosal Abercrombie to his doom, he will leave him to the clutches of the law."

"He knows how to hate," calmly remarked Montezuma.

"He does, indeed, senor; but, poor Mrs. Abercrombie, she is broken-hearted, as is Brainard, too, for she is now known to be no wife, and her son is illegitimate, while Rosal Abercrombie will, without doubt, die on the gallows."

Montezuma arose and took a quick turn across the room; his brow clouded but the next instant, with a smiling face, he turned upon Andrea Angelos.

"Senor, I cashed the draft of Ellis Monette upon Abercrombie, Sebastian & Company, just before he left my yacht to board the English packet-ship; it is payable on demand, for one-third of a million of dollars."

Andrea Angelos started; but he said, quietly: "I am sorry, senor, to cause them distress, for that amount, drawn from their bank, will hurt them, I am confident."

"They are a very rich firm, Senor Angelos."

"Yes, but they have been cramped of late—I already hold their notes for nearly a quarter million, and—"

"Go on, Mr. Angelos."

"And the different stock with which, at your command, I have lately flooded the markets, has caused them to lose fearfully, as they were invested largely, and had to sell at a very great loss. In fact, Senor Montezuma, Abercrombie & Company are in a bad way, a very bad way," and Andrea Angelos shook his head sorrowfully.

"You are a good man, Angelos. Once this very firm nearly ruined you, and against them you hold no revenge."

"And you saved me, Senor Montezuma, for I have the half a million you loaned me ready for you, owe not a dollar, and am doing an immense business."

"I am glad of it, Angelos. The money I let you have, divide equally, and keep on deposit for your two children. No thanks, for I detest thanks; now let us return to Abercrombie & Co."

"You think it would embarrass them if I pressed my draft?"

"It would, senor, and they are in much distress now—the senior of the firm in jail, to be tried for his life, and his son, proven illegitimate, almost on the verge of suicide—"

"And Captain Sebastian?"

"He has no family, or heart-troubles, senor, but he is financially ruined."

"How about his wife's estates?"

"All mortgaged."

"And the Abercrombie property?"

"Mortgaged for the last dollar."

Montezuma again strode across the room and back.

"Senor Angelos, I forgot to tell you that I

left your dear wife and children well. I return in two days to the shore, and, in the meantime, I wish you to go to Havana immediately for me upon important business—that is, to get rid of a number of Spanish bonds that I hold—Valik will give them to you: you can go at once!"

"Yes, senor, within the hour."

"Montezuma touched a gold bell, and Valik appeared.

"Carry on board of the *Launcelot* the package of Spanish bonds for the Senor Angelos, and place them within the ship's safe, giving the key to this gentleman when he arrives."

"Say to the captain that I wish him to sail immediately, under the orders of the Senor Andrea Angelos; and, Valik, carry this to my slave Mourkah, and say to him that he must deliver it to the proper address."

Valik bowed, and rising, Montezuma took from the iron safe the package of bonds, and a long rosewood box, inlaid with gold and silver, and handed them to the Nubian, who immediately disappeared.

"Now, senor, farewell; I will return as soon as I can—if not seized."

"Ha! I had forgotten—I nearly sent you into the lion's den, for I forgot that you were exiled. I will change your course to Vera Cruz. Dispose of the bonds there—"

"And your Mourkah, and his commission?"

"I will at once send Mezrak to bring him hither," and Montezuma dispatched the messenger to the *Launcelot* after Mourkah, while Andrea Angelos took his leave, glad that he did not have to risk going to Havana for the man he now loved as a brother, though he would have done so, if necessary.

In half an hour Mezrak returned with his fellow-slave, bearing the rosewood box.

"Mourkah, go to the Zulah and bid the captain run southward, putting into Havana, in distress; do you hear?"

Mourkah bowed low, yet uttered no word.

"While there, see that this box is given to the address upon it—then return and report to me."

The slave again bowed low.

"And say to the captain to keep out of sight of the *Launcelot*, and return to this port as soon as possible."

Mourkah bent down to the floor, took the box again and departed.

Half an hour after the Zulah was slowly dropping down the river, a few miles astern of the *Launcelot*, while Valik, who had returned, was sent on another errand by his master—to order Mr. Mercer, the cashier of Andrea Angelos, to draw the draft of Ellis Monette at once from the house of Abercrombie, Sebastian & Company.

An hour after Wilber Sebastian entered the magnificent home of Montezuma. He was pale and haggard, and had evidently been drinking deeply.

"And Abercrombie, have you seen him, my dear Sebastian?" asked Montezuma, as he entered.

"No, senor; it is not for him that I would speak—at least individually—but of our firm. Senor, if we cannot effect a loan within the hour we are beggars."

"My dear Sebastian, you seem really in distress."

"I am in despair, and I have come to you, senor, trusting in your well-known generosity to aid us. We only need a cash loan to tide us over for a few months, and then speculations we have entered upon will place us ahead again. We just cashed a draft upon us—one of that accursed Englishman's—for a third of a million dollars, when we expected to have the use of the money for years—that is what has brought us to the brink of ruin, for we have now only a few thousands in hand."

Wilber Sebastian spoke earnestly, and yet the smile never left the face of Montezuma.

"Well, why do you not go and borrow, Sebastian?"

"Senor, I have come to you to ask a loan of you."

"For how much?"

"Two millions will clear us," said Wilber Sebastian, hesitatingly.

"Why, certainly, you must not be ruined for a small sum like that. Go to Andrea Angelos and tell him to let you have the money. Tell him, for you must see him personally, that I told you."

Wilber Sebastian's heart was too full for him to speak. He merely seized Montezuma's hands, pressed them hard and bounded away.

In fifteen minutes he was at the elegant banking-house of the Cuban.

"I would see Mr. Angelos," he said, hastily.

"Mr. Angelos has left town for a week or two, sir."

"Gone?"

"Yes, sir; he left a short while since."

"Then, Mr. Mercer, I shall have to appeal to you. The Senor Montezuma sent me to you with permission to borrow two millions of—"

"I am very sorry, Mr. Sebastian. If Mr. Angelos were here there would be no trouble. He attends personally to all of the Senor Montezuma's money matters."

Wilber Sebastian groaned; but he said again:

"An order from the Senor Montezuma would get me the money, I suppose?"

"His check would, certainly, sir."

Captain Sebastian rushed away like a madman, sprung into a *cabriolet* and was soon put out at Montezuma's door.

"I wish to see the senor, good Valik."

"He sleeps, sir."

"Then wake him, please, and say who it is that wishes to see him; say it is most urgent."

"Senor, it is impossible; he will never be disturbed," was the polite rejoinder.

"But I must and will see him. I will seek him myself," said the half-crazed man.

But Valik's tall form confronted him.

"I would forfeit my life, sir, to disturb him."

"Stand aside, slave! I will face him, for I must."

"Senor, I will drive my dagger to your heart if you attempt to cross this threshold."

Wilber Sebastian knew that Valik would be as good as his word, and he shrunk back.

"My good Valik, if I do not see your master within five minutes I am ruined utterly—our firm is ruined. Now, do let me go and awaken him, and I will protect you from his anger."

"No; I must obey my master's orders, if life were at stake, sir. I am sorry, but so it must be."

With bitter imprecations Wilber Sebastian turned from the door and drove back to the banking house of his firm; but he stopped a square off, as a crowd caught his eye.

He looked at his watch—it was yet half an hour before bank-hours closed, and the crowd in front of Abercrombie, Sebastian & Company's doors momentarily increased, and some gesticulated wildly.

"They have presented drafts and checks which we have no money to pay! I am ruined!"

The words came from his inmost soul; then a bright light flashed in his eyes, and he bade the *cocher* drive at once to his home, where he had moved after the sale of Mildred's mansion, to Montezuma.

Here he gathered together what things he could, and again springing into the *cabriolet* drove furiously away, down a street leading to the river, while he muttered between his teeth:

"Those jewels I must and shall have."

"They are worth a fortune, and she shall give them up—or—in my frenzy I shall kill her, for I know they belonged to that accursed mutineer. She forgets that I saw him with them, years ago."

"Yes, my lovely wife, his jewels, given to you, and when and how, God alone knows, shall yet keep the wolf from my door."

The gleam of fury in the eyes of Wilber Sebastian was proof enough that he meant what he said—Mildred was in danger.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"AS YE SOW, SO SHALL YE REAP."

WHEN Montezuma awoke, late in the afternoon, he learned from Valik what had occurred between him and Wilber Sebastian.

"It is useless to tell you, Valik, that you did right, for you know my orders must always be obeyed. Now have the carriage called, and be ready to accompany me. I return this afternoon to the *chateau*."

Valik was not surprised; anything his master did was just as it should be with him; so the stylish turnout was soon at the door, and another vehicle in attendance for Valik and Mezrak, for Montezuma never made a journey without the two invaluable servants.

Upon the way to the river, Montezuma stopped at the banking-house of Andrea Angelos, and from him heard of the failure of the firm of Abercrombie & Co.

From there he drove to the *carcel*, and was ushered into the cell where was confined Rosal Abercrombie.

"This is an unfortunate affair, Mr. Abercrombie," he said, quietly.

"It is a crushing stroke, Senor Montezuma, and I am financially ruined, too; I will die on the gallows, and leave my wife and son beggars," said the unhappy man.

"It is said that she that was Helen Brainard is not your wife. You are indeed a sufferer, sir."

"Yes, I am doomed; but oh! if I knew who had thus tracked me to ruin, I would be happy, could I have but a moment for revenge."

"I have long known that some secret enemy was at work against me. I knew it through—through—a friend of mine, who has now proven false; but I believed all would remain hidden."

"I tell you, Senor Montezuma, I am doomed."

"And your—Mrs. Abercrombie?"

"She is broken-hearted, while poor Brainard is crushed by the stain upon him. Oh! senor, I have wrecked my own life as well as the lives of her whom I loved and my son."

"You do not deny your guilt then, Mr. Abercrombie?"

"I dare not—I cannot," groaned the poor man.

Montezuma made no reply, but bidding the prisoner farewell, and telling him that he would see him again, he returned to his carriage and

drove down to the pier opposite which his yacht lay at anchor.

Valik and Mezrak had already arrived, and the former awaited him on the dock, while the latter had gone on board the yacht.

"The Senor Sebastian you say is on board the Nemesis?"

"Yes, senor, so the coxswain said."

"It is well; I intended that you should look him up. Dismiss the carriages," and Montezuma walked to the pier end and sprang into the waiting boat, where Valik immediately joined him.

Giving orders to at once make sail and stand down the river, Montezuma entered his gorgeously furnished cabin, and Wilber Sebastian arose to meet him.

"Senor Montezuma, I humbly crave your pardon for taking possession of your yacht, but since we last met I am a ruined man," he said, nervously, and his face was white and haggard.

"No apologies, senor. I heard of your misfortune as I came down to the pier; it was unfortunate that you did not find Angelos, and missing him failed to see me; but Valik simply obeyed my orders.

"I am glad you are here, for I was about to send in search of you, when I learned you were on board."

"I feared violence, senor, as the depositors were talking about my fast living, and making threats.

"I am going for my wife, and we will seek some other part of the world to live, as I have a few thousand dollars in my purse for temporary expenses until I can get work. It will be a terrible shock to poor Mildred."

"Doubtless; I have heard she brought you five million dollars when she became your wife," said Montezuma, dryly.

"She did, senor, and she has now, in gems, fully a million—perhaps more."

"More, if you refer to those she wore at my ball."

"I do refer to those, and she must give them up to start me in some business again," said Wilber Sebastian, rapidly.

"She certainly esteems them highly, Captain Sebastian."

"She does, and was a fool not to take your munificent offer; but she shall give them to me, or—I will take them, as I have the right, being her husband. Do you not think I should, Senor Montezuma?"

"I never offer an opinion, Senor Sebastian, between husband and wife; but come, let us go to the deck, and when we are out in blue water I will promise you quite an entertainment—one in which you shall be an actor," and Montezuma, with one of his irresistible smiles, led the way from the cabin.

While Montezuma was conversing with his captain, Wilber Sebastian slowly paced to and fro, in the yacht's waist.

"Captain, we meet again," said a deep voice at his side.

Wilber Sebastian started visibly—his nerves were unstrung by what he had just undergone—and, near by he saw the huge form of the man who had been his boatswain upon the Sea Serpent, and who had obeyed his cruel orders to use the cat-of-nine-tails, with evident zest.

"You here!" he cried, for the sight of any of his old comrades in guilt always made him dread evil, and the death of Lucien Bethune and Otis Alden had been a great joy to him, as well as a relief to his purse.

"I am here, captain, as you see; got a berth with the prince."

"Have you been long with him?"

"Shipped on board the yacht to-day; was on the prince's ship Launcelot before; been there for two months—me and three other of the boys who served with you, sir."

"You hang together most infernally well—birds of a feather flock together," sneered Wilber Sebastian.

"Yes, captain, five of us, counting you, now on the yacht. The prince did for the luff and the saw-bones, didn't he, sir? Guess your purse is heavier since they went under."

"You are impudent, fellow. I will speak to the senor and have you punished," angrily said Wilber Sebastian.

"No you won't, good captain. This is not the Sea Serpent but the Nemesis, and you don't command. Guess you won't speak to the prince about me, for I've got a good memory."

"I haven't drawn my hush-up for two years now. Got it about your clothes, captain?"

Wilber Sebastian crushed an oath between his white teeth, shoved his hand into his pocket and drew out a roll of bills, several of which he dropped upon the deck.

Then he turned on his heel and walked away, his breast and brain throbbing violently; he had sown recklessly and cruelly, and now the harvest was coming in—a harvest of tares.

The following day the yacht was bowling merrily along in the blue waters of the Gulf, and heading north by east, with no land in sight.

Montezuma came on deck, and glanced around him with an earnest look.

Away off in the west a cloud was rising, which his experienced eye told him would bring

a gale, and turning to his yacht's captain he said, quietly:

"Lay the craft to, sir."

The order was promptly obeyed, and then followed another order, given in a calm, even voice:

"Call all hands to witness punishment!"

At this moment Wilber Sebastian came on deck to discover why the yacht was lying to, and beheld the crew mustered, and the huge man, who had been his boatswain on the Sea Serpent, standing ready, the cat-of-nine-tails in his hand.

"Captain Sebastian, I promised you a treat when we got into blue waters, and said you should be an actor in it. I now intend to keep my word."

There was something in the burning eye turned upon him that made Wilber Sebastian tremble, and he started back, with a half-cry upon his lips.

"Seize and bind the prisoner!"

The deep voice of Montezuma rung like a trumpet, and two seamen stepped forward and took hold of Wilber Sebastian!

"What means this outrage? Unhand me, devils, or I will kill you," yelled the now thoroughly alarmed man; but he was securely bound in an instant.

"Senor Montezuma, I will hold you responsible for this insult," and he turned his flashing eyes upon the calm, smiling face of the Mexican, who stood with folded arms looking upon him.

"Bind him to the grating!"

In spite of his struggles, three seamen quickly obeyed the order—his feet being securely bound, while his arms were yet ironed.

"Now strip him to the waist, and you, sir, do your duty."

The order came quietly from between the white teeth, and turning, Montezuma lighted a cigar from a small silver lamp, brought to him by a cabin-boy, and then leaned in graceful attitude against the mainmast.

In the meantime, Wilber Sebastian's elegant coat had been torn from his back, and then he was laid bare to the waist, unmindful of the fearful curses that issued from his lips.

"Senor Montezuma, will you allow this infernal outrage?"

"I have ordered it, Wilber Sebastian."

"In the name of God how have I injured you?"

Montezuma smiled, but made no reply, and Captain Sebastian cried again:

"And your orders are to have me lashed?"

"My orders, Wilber Sebastian, to that huge brute who holds the lash, are to show no mercy, but, to whip you until you are dead."

"Oh, God, have mercy!"

"That prayer has broken from lips before, and been unanswered," was the merciless reply.

The head of Wilber Sebastian dropped in despair, and the keen lashes of the cat fell upon his bare shoulders.

Then from the teeth-gnawed lips broke shriek after shriek, as the blows fell savagely upon the flesh—the executioner pausing not in his grim duty, and Montezuma, without the quiver of a muscle, and with the smile he always wore when deeply moved, upon his marble face, gazing with his melancholy, yet merciless eyes upon the victim.

At last the blood-bespattered, grim, and panting executioner ceased his work, and turned toward Montezuma:

"He is dying, senor."

Quickly the man of marble face stepped forward and bent over the dying man:

"Wilber Sebastian!"

The head slowly turned and the eyes met those of Montezuma.

"You asked me how you ever wronged me?"

"I will tell you."

Placing his mouth close to the ear of Wilber Sebastian, he whispered a few words, each one of which was heard.

"Oh, God! my punishment is just—my crimes have been great!"

The head again dropped forward—a shudder shook the form, and Wilber Sebastian was dead.

"Now, sir, it is your turn; have you ever felt the lash?"

"I have never been whipped, senor," answered the huge boatswain, to whom the remark was addressed.

"I thought not; you were ever so ready to inflict the lash on others; you shall have one dozen of the cat, sir."

The man looked as though he would have resisted; but he dare not, and was seized up and bound to the grating, from whence the body of Wilber Sebastian had just been cut down.

Valik, lay on that man's bare back, one dozen lashes of the cat; then cut him down and pay him the sum I agreed to give him—fifty thousand dollars, and five thousand to each of his three companions.

The order was promptly obeyed by Valik, Montezuma, as before, seeing the blows given.

Then he called to him the yacht's sailing-master:

"Captain, the first foreign-bound vessel you sight, signal it, and place that huge bully and his three comrades on board, paying their pas-

sage to whatever port the vessel is bound. Warn them never to cross my path again."

"It shall be as you wish, senor; and the body, sir?" and the captain—in whom the reader could not fail to recognize one of the Sea Serpent mutineers—the yacht's crew comprising the balance yet alive, fourteen in number—turned a glance toward the white, ghastly face of Wilber Sebastian.

"Have it sewn up in a hammock, the feet heavily shotted, and placed where the waves will wash it into the sea—that must be his end," and with a smile Montezuma re-entered his cabin.

When he again came on deck, the yacht was bounding along under close-reefed sails over the wind-swept and foaming waters, and the vessel was constantly flooded by the waves.

"Where is Captain Sebastian?" he asked, of Valik.

"He was borne off into the sea, senor, by a mighty wave," was the cool rejoinder.

"And those four men?"

"Are there, senor, awaiting to be placed on yonder vessel, which the captain has signaled," and Valik pointed to a large clipper ship standing southward, and which, as he looked, laid her sails aback, to await the coming nearer of the yacht.

Without an order the yacht's life-boat was launched, a crew sprung in, and the four men followed, the boatswain turning toward Montezuma, a curious leer upon his face, as he said:

"Farewell, senor; I'll not forget your princely generosity, or the cat; but I deserved it, as did Wilber Sebastian deserve his fate—you have made me and my comrades rich, senor, and we won't forget you."

Montezuma bowed with the courtly grace habitual with him, and the boat rowed away over the rough waters, and in half an hour was again hanging at the yacht's davits, while the fleet craft continued its course for the *Chateau d'Espagne*.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

QUAFFED TO THE BITTER DREGS.

THE season that had commenced so pleasantly at the Chateau d'Espagne ended with a mantle of sorrow and gloom drawn across the future, and with only an embittered past for many to look back upon.

Out of the pleasant party that had been enjoying the hospitalities of Montezuma at his seaside home, all felt the shock of adversity, excepting the Senora Angelos and her two lovely children, for Captain Grenville had lost his all by the failure of Abercrombie & Company, and Don Felipe had also been bit hard, for both of these gentlemen had deposited largely with the unsound firm.

When the Nemesis arrived, and Montezuma, in his quiet, sympathetic way, made known the reverses that had fallen upon them financially, and told Mildred that she was a widow—that her husband had been carried off on a huge wave that swept the yacht's decks, there was deep gloom in the Chateau d'Espagne, and the following day the swift vessel was flying back again to New Orleans, bearing as passengers Montezuma, and those who had been his guests.

Desiring to have his yacht near at hand, Montezuma made the passage round the river, and, met with contrary winds one day, and light breezes or calms the next, it was some time before the anchor was let fall in front of the city, and the party departed, some of them for homes no longer their own, for the hammer of the auctioneer was destined to echo through their halls, instead of the sound of revelry.

As soon as possible Mildred separated herself from the wreck of her fortunes, and with a few thousand dollars she had in hand, and which Montezuma told her was left in the yacht's cabin by her husband, she sought a small cottage home on the outskirts of the city, accompanied by her faithful maid, Louise, and Daniel and his wife Phoebe, all that remained to her—excepting her priceless jewels; these, she said she would starve before she would part with.

And what a change! from luxury and wealth, to a cottage retreat and poverty, for Mildred felt that she must go to work, as the few hundred dollars left, after the purchase of her little home, would not last a lifetime.

"And still I am happier than before," she murmured, as she sat one day in her *bijou* parlor, lost in deep thought.

"I am happier, because I am free from him—my husband, and yet not my husband; but oh, what a fearful death to die; borne off on the wild waters to die alone—I pity him, for how terrible must have been his last moments—I pity him, yet I never loved him, for he it was who wrecked my love and the life of—but I must not think of him; I dare not."

Oh, if poor Mildred had but known how her husband had died, her face would have blanched forever white.

And the world said that Captain Sebastian had not been washed into the sea, but had thrown himself into the mad waters, rendered desperate by his loss of fortune; but "the world," as it usually is, was also at fault.

Don Felipe, though shaken to the foundation, by the failure of Abercrombie & Company did

not lose his elegant home, or, for one moment, ~~some~~ his luxurious style of living—he had a private fund of his own, won at the card-table, which he could draw on, until he recuperated his fallen fortunes; in fact, the Don was too old a bird to be caught with chaff, and his losses but made gossips say he was far richer than had been believed, for he was just as courtly in his manners as before the failure, and spent his gold with even a freer hand, so that his credit remained "gilt-edged, on change."

Captain Grenville, as he stepped across the meridian of life, found himself a poor man; he had trusted so much to his bankers, and indorsed their paper for them in perfect confidence, to find that his home must go, and he be able to retain hardly income sufficient to support him—in fact not enough, unless he eked it out by putting his own shoulder to the wheel; but this wheel was found, for, returning from Vera Cruz, Andrea Angelos at once offered him the position of private secretary, with little to do, and good remuneration, and it was gladly accepted.

But the shock fell heavily upon Estelle—the beautiful, heartless woman who had almost brought her husband to the verge of ruin, ere the failure of his bankers, by her willful extravagance, her passion for gambling, for it was nothing else, and her indifference to the future, so that she could revel in the present.

When informed that her pet, her "boy lover," as she called Brainard Abercrombie, bore a name one dare not mention in polite society, she had cast him off without a struggle—she must keep her own skirts clean, she thought, and had at once written to the young man, demanding her rings, her letters, tender little missives, more childish than wicked, and severed the link of sentimentality that had bound them.

The missives, rings and many little souvenirs, given him in a happy past, were returned by the messenger—no letter accompanied them—only a card bearing these words in Latin:

"Nemo me impune lacessit."

Now this little quotation, short as it was, caused Madame Estelle to turn pale—she did not feel comfortable, after its reception, and wished that she had not been so hasty; in fact, one would have thought that she carried a guilty conscience beneath that fair and lovely exterior.

But the "most unkindest cut of all," the hardest blow, fell upon those who bore the name of Abercrombie—Rosal Abercrombie dishonored, and in jail as the murderer of a woman, and all his fortune and his friends—friends always take their departure when fortune goes—gone from him; his wife lying in her humble quarters, no wife at all, and blankly awaiting to die; his son, upon whose brow was branded in letters never to be erased, the one word—*illegitimate*; this son, pacing day and night, like a tiger in his cage, the limits of his small room, listening to the groans of his white-faced mother—his mother and yet no wife.

Presently a knock came upon the door—was repeated, and again repeated, ere the young man roused himself to bid the one outside enter.

It was Valik.

"The senor Montezuma begs that you will visit him, sir; his carriage awaits you."

A flash of hope came into the sunken eyes; but it was gone in an instant.

Without a word Brainard took up his hat and followed Valik.

As the elegant carriage rolled away from the door, a *cabriolet*, coming from an opposite direction, dashed up to the curb, and a tall form sprang out and entered the portal.

Ascending the stairs the man entered the room without knocking, and crossed to a door opening into the apartment occupied by the stricken mother.

His light knock was answered by the appearance of a nurse.

"I would see Mrs. Abercrombie."

"She is very ill, monsieur; but who shall I say desires to see her?"

"Montezuma."

This name was a talisman, and the door opened, and Montezuma entered, his hand seeking that of the nurse, in which was left a golden souvenir.

"I would see the lady alone."

The woman quickly withdrew—her curiosity to count her *douceurs* overcoming her desire to see what the famous Mexican could wish there.

The eyes of the invalid turned upon Montezuma as he approached, and there was a look of inquiry in them.

"Madame, I have come to see you, for I warned that the hand of death was upon you."

"My heart is breaking, and it is better that I die; but my poor boy, what will become of him?" groaned the unhappy woman.

"I have to speak to you of your son, madame—he has upon him a weight sufficient to drive him mad; but he is young, and in another land, under another name, he has it in his power to carve out his fortune anew. I pity him, and I would serve him."

"Senor, if you will aid him—if you will send

me one wound me with impunity.

him away from where he is accursed with the brand upon him, I will die content," and the woman seemed almost happy in the look that beamed on her face.

"You have said so, and you will, senor?" she continued.

"*Cela depend, madame.*" *

The woman started.

"Upon what, senor?"

"Upon your answering me several questions."

"I will do so; anything for my poor boy's happiness."

Montezuma smiled and said pleasantly:

"Your son I pity from the bottom of my heart, and I am not one of that creed to 'visit upon the children the sins of their parents,' though I am merciless toward those who have wronged me and mine; now, my dear madame, the questions I ask you are easy enough to answer, when I pledge you your answers shall go no further than myself."

"They will dig up a past which you had hoped was buried; but then there has been such an exhuming of long-entombed skeletons of late that you will doubtless not refuse to answer, when your son's welfare hangs upon your words."

Helen Brainard—for she held no right to the name of Abercrombie—grew nervous under that calm voice and those burning eyes; but she said, as calmly as she could:

"I am ready, senor, to hear what you have to ask."

"I would ask you, then, if it was not to Rosal Abercrombie that Launcelot Grenville owed the charge against him of having murdered his brother Arthur?"

Helen Brainard grew even more white, and her fingers clutched the covering nervously; but she replied in a distinct voice:

"It was, senor."

"He it was who bribed the fisherman Beal to say what he did?"

"Yes, senor, I have since found out that such was the case."

"And he swore falsely?"

"He did, senor; but that is not all."

"I am listening, madame."

"I, too, am guilty—I sought to have Launcelot Grenville hung for the murder of Arthur Grenville; but then I believed him guilty, for I knew not until the return of him whom we believed dead, that he lived."

"I loved Arthur Grenville then; I was a mad fool, and—but, oh! let me not dwell upon that now; only let me say that I sold myself to Rosal Abercrombie, if he would prove Launcelot Grenville his brother's murderer; when I found out that he was not, I dare not refuse the man who held me in his power—would to God I had done so, then this bitter cup would have passed from me."

"Madame, I thank you; you have my pledged word not to speak of this, and I now pledge myself to aid your son—if he will allow me."

"He admires you, senor; he will be governed by you; but, tell me, why you wished to know of the past of Rosal Abercrombie and myself?"

"Madame, I will tell you in a few words, but your lips must be sealed to what I reveal—then you will see who it is that has been the untiring foe of those who bear the name of Abercrombie."

Stooping quickly, Montezuma said a few words in a low tone.

Helen Brainard would have cried out in horrified amazement; but she could utter no sound.

The next instant Montezuma was gone.

In the meantime, Brainard paced the elegant reception-room, waiting impatiently for the coming of the host; no easy-chair was comfortable to him—no costly *bric-a-brac* could claim his eye then; the world was in a whirl to him—the future hopeless and uncertain.

Presently Montezuma entered, calm, smiling, and sympathetic.

"Brainard, my poor fellow, I sent for you to have a chat with you—I am glad you have come; sit down and we will have a bottle of wine together, and you can collect your scattered senses."

"You, then, senor, have not turned against me, too, as all the rest have done?" said the young man, in broken tones.

"When God lays his hand upon a man, Brainard, I take mine off—you have a curse upon you that few men of spirit would live under; I pity you for the woe that you feel, and I sent for you to offer you aid—hold! I do not wish you to interrupt me."

"You have been brought up, Brainard, to believe this world your footstool, to kick out of the way as you pleased; to look upon the virtue of women as a good thing in novels, but a bad thing in practice; to regard a gambling debt as far more necessary to liquidate than your tailor's bill or your wine bill—in fact, you became under this training a *roue*—a gentlemanly blackguard, looking down upon all beneath you in wealth or family, and now you have fallen below them all—you have tumbled from heaven to hell, and despair stares you in the face."

"Your mother I just saw; she is dying, and will not live a week—your father will be tried

* That depends, madam.

in three days, found guilty, and hung; he it is who has done you this wrong, and I am going to offer you advice—I know advice is a bad thing to offer alone, but I intend to mix mine with substantial reality."

"You must leave New Orleans—wait and bury your mother decently—if she sinned toward you, you, as a son, can forgive her; your father cannot forgive."

"Now, my advice is to bury your mother decently—place a stone over her head as a tribute of your love—then pay your debts, every dollar you owe, and leave New Orleans forever."

"Leave behind you no friend, no regret—wipe your feet and hands of the past, and under another name, in another land, seek your fortune, for I shall give you the corner-stone upon which to build it."

"It matters not how, but your parents have wronged me and mine deeply; but I pity you, my poor Brainard, and I will serve you—if you will allow me so to do."

There was something in the last few words of Montezuma that told the young man that there was a proviso.

"You would have me do something for you first, senor?"

"You are right; you are, or rather were, the intimate friend of Madame Estelle Grenville?"

The young man turned scarlet under the burning eyes bent upon him.

"I was senor; but that is all over now."

"Yes, as rats are said to do, Estelle Grenville would always desert a sinking ship," sneered Montezuma.

Then he quickly added:

"Brainard, I bought up many of the papers, drafts, checks and *electera* of your firm; there are some checks among them with the signature of Arthur Grenville—but he never signed them."

The haggard face grew pallid; but the man made no reply.

"Who signed those checks for Arthur Grenville?"

"I cannot tell, senor."

"You must tell; I will aid you as I promised, if you do—I will—"

"Spare me, senor!"

"Who handed those checks in, Brainard?"

"Mrs. Grenville."

"Who signed them, Brainard?"

"Mrs. Grenville."

"She committed forgery?"

"Yes, senor."

"Who received the money?"

"Mrs. Grenville."

"Who shared it with her?"

There was no reply; but Brainard trembled like an aspen.

"Who shared the money thus received on forged checks with Mrs. Grenville?"

The question was merciless—the eyes read the face before them.

"I did, senor."

"You managed Arthur Grenville's estates—that is, all deposits, collections, checks and payments went through your hands?"

"Yes, senor."

"Had not those checks been drawn he would be worth now a hundred thousand dollars, for that amount has been taken from him in the past twelve years?"

"Yes, senor."

"Who suggested this fraud, Brainard?"

"Estelle Grenville, senor."

"She made you her confederate in guilt?"

"Yes, senor."

"Have you any writing of Estelle Grenville's compromising to her?"

"I returned her her letters and little *souvenirs* she had given me two days ago, senor."

"All of them?"

"No, senor, there were a few notes."

"Have you these?"

"Yes, senor, in my private desk, at my quarters."

"Brainard, I must have those letters—here I have the forged checks, you see?"

The young man shivered, as though with the cold.

"You shall have them, senor."

"You are sensible; Valik will return with you and bring them to me; and, Brainard, I intend to use them."

"For God's sake spare me, Senor Montezuma—my father in jail, my mother dying, and I—"

"Brainard, I tell you I intend saving you; but I will make Estelle Grenville suffer—you shall not be compromised, I pledge you."

"Now you must return that money to Captain Grenville."

"Senor?"

"I mean it; but not for several days yet."

"Senor, I have not a thousand dollars in the world."

"I will give it to you, Brainard, and you must send it to Captain Grenville, telling him it was the result of an investment you entered into privately, and which went not with the firm's crash; do you understand?"

"Yes, senor."

"Then, Brainard, I intend to give you the money with which to pay your personal debts here; how much do you owe—at a guess?"

"Fully ten thousand, senor."

"Very well, I will place that sum in your hands; then I will give you one hundred thousand dollars in cash, upon condition you leave New Orleans forever, seek another land, and endeavor to lead a life of honor—not living beyond your means; but you must go as soon as you have buried your mother, and you must leave your father to his fate."

"Do you accept my terms?"

"I do, senor."

"Enough; send me the letters by Valik, and as soon as your mother is in her grave—come to me for the money I promised you."

The cup of misery was being quaffed to the bitter dregs.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ESTELLE GRENVILLE PLAYS FOR A HIGH STAKE.

ESTELLE GRENVILLE sat in her sumptuous rooms, lost in thought.

She had a week's respite ere she yielded her home to the auctioneer's hammer, and she was plotting and planning how that bitter pill that must be swallowed, *nolens volens*, could be made sugar-coated.

At last an idea struck her; that is it was a determination to make use of an idea which she had been harboring for several days—in fact ever since her return from the *Chateau d'Espagne*.

With Estelle to decide was to act, and she arose at once, made an exquisite toilet, putting on a dress she had never yet worn, veiled herself securely from prying eyes, and walked out.

She soon called a passing *cabriolet*, and told the coachman where to drive her.

He drew up at the private entrance of the Montezuma mansion.

A servant stood in attendance, and she sent in her card, for the billionaire was at home.

"Madame Grenville, be seated. This is an honor, indeed, and I was intending to visit you, as soon as some callers I had departed," and Montezuma led the way into an inner room.

"Now, my dear madame, tell me to what fortunate circumstance do I owe the honor of your visit?"

Estelle was charmed—the great man had never been so gracious before to her; she did not know that it was his nature to lead one who was destined to walk over a precipice by a path of flowers, to make the end more biting.

"Senor Montezuma, I am bold in thus seeking you; but you know the proverb—Necessity knows no law," and Estelle threw her sweetest look into her glorious eyes.

"How can I serve you, madame?" and Montezuma smiled as sweetly as had the woman.

"I will tell you, senor," and hope arose high in her heart.

"I will tell you, Senor Montezuma. You know my husband and myself are beggars now?"

Montezuma's eyes flashed over the superb dress of velvet and silk, then at the *solitaire* eardrops, and again upon the jeweled hand, upon which trembled, like a great drop of frozen blood, the ruby he had given. There were also other jewels there.

She understood that look and colored, while she said quickly:

"Senor, these will have to go to buy us a little home—if you refuse my request," she added, archly.

"Lady, you cannot miss your fine dresses, as of course you intend going in mourning for your brother."

It was a home thrust; Wilber Sebastian had been a month dead and she was dressed as a princess, in emerald green.

"Senor, my wardrobe is making now for my poor brother—the mourning goods are in the hands of my *modiste*; this is the first time I have been out since our return from your lovely home, and, as I said, I come now from dire necessity."

"How can I serve you, lady?" again asked Montezuma.

"Senor, you can save me from ruin—utter, crushing ruin that faces me. Ah! Senor Montezuma, I love riches, and what gold will bring. I am a mere butterfly. Take from me my wealth, and I am but a groveling worm."

"Senor, you are worth, it is said, hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars, and I beg but for a sum as a loan, that you throw away daily in charities, upon the undeserving paupers who flock the streets, and dare look us aristocrats in the face."

"A cat may look at a king, lady."

"Yes, but in admiration; those poverty-stricken wretches look at us with envy and hatred."

"I fear we are the ones who have set them the example, by showing what we feel toward them; but, Madame Grenville, what sum do you desire?"

Estelle's heart gave one great throb of joy, and she almost whispered:

"Enough to clear our home, senor, and give me an income to live upon."

"And Captain Grenville?"

"Oh, I include him in speaking of myself."

"There is how much on your home, Mrs. Grenville?"

"The captain indorsed for those scamps—"

"Your brother was a member of that firm, madame."

Again Estelle colored deeply; but it was intensely becoming to her.

"I forgot myself, in my distress. He indorsed for Abercrombie & Company for a quarter of a million—that was just the value of all he has in real estate."

"Indeed! he was a millionaire, some years ago, I have heard."

"Yes, but the captain will live fast—will drink the most costly wines, and he—"

"Must gamble and lose heavily."

Again a blush, and the beautiful eyes drooped.

"And you wish a quarter of a million dollars on loan, Mrs. Grenville?"

"Yes, senor—one third of that would clear our mansion, and the interest on the balance would allow us to live, for our other property brings in a good rental," and Estelle spoke of herself as *our* and *us*, since the question of Montezuma about her husband.

"Mrs. Sebastian, I will tell you what I will do," and Montezuma's tones were low and soft, and his eyes were dangerously expressive.

"I have heard that you were fond of a game of cards, and I also play at times; so I will stake half a million against one thing."

"Name it, senor," said the delighted woman.

"Your word."

"My word, senor?"

"Yes, madame; if you will promise to grant me a favor, upon your sacred word of honor, if you lose in the game we play. I will stake half a million against that promise."

"If I win I get the money?"

"Yes, madame."

"If I lose I am to grant you a favor?"

"Yes, madame, any favor I ask of you."

The woman's face turned of a scarlet hue; but she answered promptly:

"I agree, senor, be the favor what it may."

Montezuma bowed, turned and touched a gold bell.

Valik at once appeared.

"Bring me cards here; also half a million dollars in Bank of England notes."

"Ah, senor, are we to play now?"

"Yes, madame; life is intensely uncertain. Witness the death of your brother, and your friends Alden and Bethune. We will play now, for there is no time like the present."

"And your waiting friends?"

"Can remain waiting friends; there is wine before them, and that is what they came for."

At this moment Valik returned, bringing the cards and the money.

"Now some iced champagne, and some *bonbons*, Valik."

A table was cleared, the refreshments brought and placed upon them, and the two seated themselves, the cards before them, the bank-notes at one side.

The man was cool and smiling; the woman was flushed, trembling and nervous.

"You shuffle and deal, madame. I give you the chances."

The woman gave him a quick glance; she was almost tempted to throw up the game.

The cards were distributed and the game began—progressed—ended.

Montezuma had won.

"I have lost my half-million; now I am ready to keep my word," she said, recklessly. She was ready to lose her soul then, if gold would but weigh down the balance, and she believed that it would.

"I shall hold you to your promise, madame. Are you a member of the church of Rome?"

"I am, senor," and the woman looked surprised.

"Then it cannot be such a fearful sacrifice for you to follow that which your creed teaches."

"I do not understand, Senor Montezuma," stammered the beautiful woman.

"It teaches," and the tone was strangely soft, "it teaches, 'Poverty, Chastity and Obedience' to one about to take the veil."

Estelle Grenville turned deadly pale, and she cried in almost terror, as she caught those eyes of liquid fire fixed upon her:

"But I do not intend to take the veil, senor."

"Pardon me, lady; but you do."

She tried to rise to her feet, but her limbs were unequal to the effort, and she could but gaze in horror at the man before her.

"Your promise, madame."

"And you wish me to leave the gay world—to become a nun?"

"It is my wish, madame."

"Oh, senor, you are surely not in earnest?"

"I am in deadly earnest, madame."

"How can my leaving the world and becoming a recluse benefit you, Senor Montezuma?"

"I shall have gained my end—you will have paid your debt to me—kept your word."

"Never!" and the woman was on her feet, her eyes blazing.

Montezuma smiled.

"Is this your decision, madame?"

"It is! No man shall make a fool of me, even Montezuma of Mexico."

"It is to keep you from making a fool of yourself, and others, that I wish you away from the world."

"And I say I defy you."

"Poor little foolish moth—to allow the flame to singe your pretty wings."

"Senor Montezuma, I will not allow you to speak of me so."

"Again I ask, madame, will you keep your word?"

"And again I say, never!"

Montezuma touched the gold bell.

"Valik, bring me the papers tied with blue ribbon in my desk."

In five minutes the slave placed them in his hands.

"Mrs. Grenville, you have refused to pay your debt to me—that is, to keep your word; now I shall force you to do so."

Estelle started in spite of herself, and yet she drew her form up and turned upon her persecutor with flashing eyes.

"Mrs. Grenville, do you know what the penalty is for forging another's name to a check?"

Estelle Grenville dropped back in her seat, her face as pale as death.

"Mrs. Grenville," continued the merciless man, "is forging your only crime?" and he glanced at an open letter he held in his hand.

"Senor Montezuma, I am on my knees to you—spare me!"

The beautiful woman dropped down before him, her hands uplifted, her face pallid and imploring.

"Mrs. Grenville, arise!"

Silently she obeyed.

"Mrs. Grenville, in three days I shall call at the *Convent des Ursulines*, and I shall ask there for you, under the name you take as a recluse; if you are not there, the papers I hold shall be published to the world, and you shall go to the State's Prison for forgery."

"It is useless for you to attempt to break the chain I have encircled you with; it is of gold."

"Oh, God! I am lost."

"You are certainly lost if you do not obey. You shall be under the eyes of well-paid spies from this moment, and you shall take the veil—or—"

"Or what, senor?" came from between the blue lips.

"Or you shall take your own life."

The woman's head was drooped, and sobs shook her frame; but there was no mercy in the marble face before her.

At length she looked up, and she read there that her doom was sealed—she was powerless to break the chains that bound her.

"Senor," and she spoke slowly and distinctly, "you are in the form of an angel; but your heart is the heart of a devil."

Montezuma bestowed upon her his most fascinating smile, while he added:

"It is such as you, Estelle Grenville, that make devils of men; but, remember—in three days."

"Can I see you to your carriage, lady?" and he offered his arm.

Estelle touched it lightly, sprung into her carriage, and drove home—a ruined, broken-hearted woman.

Three days after, true to his word, Montezuma drove up to the *Convent des Ursulines*, was shown into the sacred edifice by the mother superior, who received from the billionaire a handsome sum for the holy institution; and, in return, he learned that Estelle, under the name of *Sœur Rosalie*, had taken the veil of Perpetual Sisterhood.

And *Sœur Rosalie*?

In her retirement from the world she learned who it was had placed his iron hand upon her heart, to forever shut out its joy.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE MILLS OF THE GODS STILL GRINDING.

I WILL now return to the vessels that comprised two-thirds of the fleet of Montezuma—the *Launcelot* and the *Zulah*.

The *Launcelot* made a rapid run, and *Andrea Angelos* disposed of the Spanish bonds as a fair figure, and started upon his return to New Orleans, where he arrived, to find that the rival bankers had gone down in gloom, and that adversity still trod close upon their heels; for the trial of *Rosal Abercrombie* had come off the very day that the woman he had cruelly deceived, *Helen Brainard*, had died.

In that trial the prisoner, proud as had been his name, great as had been his wealth, had been proven guilty of the charges against him—the proofs and testimony, the written confession of his wife, taken from the bank, where it had lain for years, had been beyond doubt, and the jury had returned their verdict—Guilty of murder in the first degree."

Then the sentence of the judge had followed. *Rosal Abercrombie* was to be hung on the gallows.

But he had one favor to ask the judge—that the day should be appointed as soon as possible.

This was granted, and little enough to grant a doomed man. One week after his sentence,

Rosal Abercrombie paid, with his life, the penalty of the outraged law.

Calm, white, and with downcast eyes, he walked to the gallows; but he trembled as his foot touched the fatal step.

"Permit me, senor?"

It was the deep voice of Montezuma—the man who had crowded the prisoner's cell with every comfort and delicacy, up to the last moment—the man who had promised to see him again, and now met him under the gallows.

"Permit me, senor?" and Montezuma's strong arm aided the trembling wretch up the wooden steps, the sheriff yielding to a *billionaire*.

The noose was adjusted to the satisfaction of the sheriff, and the last word was waited for.

Then Montezuma bade the doomed one farewell, and the eager mass beheld him whispering to the man who stood upon Death's brink.

But the words affected Rosal Abercrombie strangely, for he writhed, reeled, and would have fallen, had not Montezuma held him up.

"He has a fit!" cried a dozen voices near by.

"Spring the trap," said Montezuma, calmly.

The sheriff obeyed, and Rosal Abercrombie was jerked into Eternity from the scaffold of a gallows, while his friend, Montezuma of Mexico, made his way through the crowd to his carriage.

From the gallows, Montezuma drove to the humble quarters of Brainard—or Hugh Brainard, as he intended calling himself in the future, and his mother's cognomen he certainly had a right to, if any one had.

"Well, Brainard, I saw your father hung; now, when do you leave?"

"Senor, I received your message, and was only awaiting to see you."

"And your mother is in her grave?"

"Yes; a week ago," and the voice of the young man trembled. He had truly loved his mother—he would have been a brute, had he not done so.

"Then you must leave on the packet that sails to-night; but first drive by the house of Captain Grenville, and pay him this money."

"Estelle, his wife, is in the convent I hear."

"Yes."

"She has gone then, senor—to use your own tongue—*hurlar para dar por Dios*," (to steal in order to give to God,) said the young man.

"No, she has taken the veil; but, I learned from her, that it will take a larger amount to clear Captain Grenville wholly, and give him sufficient to live on, so I wish you to hand him this package—a quarter of a million in all—and tell him it is *conscience-money*."

"Here is your own fortune I promised you—one hundred thousand. Now live differently from what you have in the past; be honorable, and farewell."

The eyes of Hugh Brainard were full of tears; his hand trembled as he held it forth, but he could utter no word, and Montezuma turned quickly and left him.

An hour after the outcast was on the packet, bound for New York. He had obeyed the orders, given him by Montezuma, to the letter, and was leaving forever the land where the iron had sunk deep into his soul.

Upon his return to his home, Montezuma found there his slave—Mourkah, who had sailed in the Zulah, in obedience to the orders of his mighty master.

"The Zulah has returned then?"

"She has, senor; she lies in the river."

"You put in at Havana?"

"Yes, senor, in distress of weather."

"You carried the box to its address?"

"I did, senor."

"You gave it into his own hands?"

"No, senor; I gave it into the hands of his head servant, with orders to present it to his master when he awoke in the morning."

"Which he did?"

"Which he did, senor."

"And the result?"

In answer the slave took from his sash a slip of paper—a printed slip.

Montezuma took it calmly, and read, aloud:

A STARTLING CASE OF REVENGE!

"AFTER EIGHTEEN YEARS!

'A GOOD MEMORY FOR EVIL!

"AN INFERNAL PRESENT!

"VENGEANCE DIABOLICAL!

"Merle, the Mutineer, Again!

"Many of our readers will recall eighteen years ago, when Merle, the Mutineer, was captured by Captain De Silva, of the *Isabella*, sloop-of-war, and he and his confederates, over two-score in number, were sentenced to be shot as pirates—sentenced by the senor, General Facon, who was Governor-General at that time, and one who has, since his resignation, been one of our most honored citizens in Havana.

"They will also recall the remarkable escape of Merle, the Mutineer, by rushing from the line of death, and leaping from the cliff, over forty feet, into the sea, the act being followed by his comrades, and gaining for the daring leader the name of *El Saltador*.

"The greater number of the pirates gained the deck of a small American yacht, lying at anchor under the cliff, cut the cable, and es-

caped, though pursued by several cruisers then in port.

"Since that most daring escape on record, there have been many rumors regarding the career of *El Saltador*, or Merle, the Mutineer, some saying that he is none other than Rafael, the Rover, others that he is Ricardo, who has been buccaneering in the Caribbean, and still more that he is the famous pirate, Belmont, of the northern seas.

"Whichever of this unworthy trio he may be, we know not; but we do know that he has not forgotten the ex-Governor-General, as the sequel will show.

"Last night a servant, supposed to be a foreigner, as he spoke broken Spanish, called at the elegant mansion of the Governor-General at a very late hour, and left with the head-servant an elegant rosewood box, to be given to the General when he arose in the morning.

"With considerable admiration the Governor gazed upon the beautiful box, which was inlaid with silver and gold, and then opened it.

"A beautiful horn of gold was revealed, and a card upon which was written:

"To discover the treasure within, place the right hand as far in the horn as possible, and touch a spring with the fore-finger.

"Let only the Senor Facon, ex-Governor-General, search for the secret, otherwise the charm is broken."

"Thinking some of his friends and admirers, and their name is legion, had sent him the beautiful gift, the Governor obeyed, thrusting his hand as far as possible into the horn of gold, and touching a spring he felt there.

"Instantly a whirring sound followed, and the Governor attempted to withdraw his hand; but it was impossible, for it was in a grasp that a giant could not resist.

"Then louder and louder grew the noises within the horn, followed by snapping and breaking sounds, and those around saw the Governor's face grow deathly pale, and then, with a cry of agony—such a cry as only the most excruciating agony can wring from the lips of a strong man—General Facon sunk to the floor in a faint, the horn of horror still clinging to his hand.

"At once the Governor's surgeon was sent for, and upon his arrival the infernal machine, after great difficulty, was taken from the hand of the unfortunate senor; but, alas! the whole hand was crushed into a bleeding mass, the bones of the wrist being also broken, so that immediate amputation was found to be necessary—the Governor standing the severe operation like the old hero he is.

"The diabolical instrument was then examined, and a slide was discovered, which revealed some words engraven in the gold.

"They read:

"Thus perish the hand which signed the death-sentence of Merle the Mutineer."

"This was all that was said, and God knows it is enough.

"The horn was found to be of pure gold outside, and inside was a steel infernal machine, with knives, crushers and tiny saws, a thin plate of gold dividing them from the hand, which, when the spring was touched, was seized in the ruthless grasp and mangled, cut and pulled out of all shape.

"The detectives are searching for the one who left the diabolical gift, and the Governor offers a large reward for his discovery and arrest.

"There is no mark upon the box, the horn of horror, to discover who was the maker, but we trust that Merle the Mutineer will yet be caught and receive the penalty of his heinous act of revenge."

"Mourkah, you have done well; return to the ship," was the calm remark of Montezuma, when he had finished reading the printed scrap, cut from a Havana paper; but upon his face was that smile which none could fathom.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MONTEZUMA PLAYS A GAME OF CARDS WITH DON FELIPE COSALA.

THE reader will easily imagine what a surprise it was to Andrea Angelos to return from his voyage to Vera Cruz and discover the changes that had taken place. First, the failure of the house of Abercrombie, Sebastian and Company, and the death of Rosal Abercrombie upon the gallows for murder; then the death of poor Helen Brainard of a broken heart, and flight of her son for parts unknown; the death, or suicide, as it was called, of Wilber Sebastian, and the remarkable act of Estelle Grenville in becoming a recluse from the world, while her husband, who had been said to have lost everything by the failure of Abercrombie and Company, had suddenly paid the notes held against his property, and deposited in his—Andrea Angelos's—banking-house the sum of one hundred thousand dollars.

Mildred, in comparative poverty, and advertising for music-scholars, was another great change; in fact, Andrea Angelos would hardly have recognized his old set of intimates in the time he had been away, and which was some weeks longer than he had expected, owing to damage to the *Launcelot* by a severe gale.

But the day after his return he saw the Havana papers, containing the notice of the revenge of Merle the Mutineer upon the ex-Governor-General of Cuba, and he found the good people of New Orleans considerably excited over the subject, for it brought to their minds vividly the remembrance of that affair, in which the names of some of their best citizens figured.

There was one other person who read the news, and a strange look came into his eyes, as he sipped his iced-champagne in the *Cafe Bourse*.

At last he arose and walked rapidly along the Rue St. Louis, and soon was ushered into the magnificent mansion of Montezuma.

"Ah! Don Felipe Cosala; I am glad you dropped in; am just breakfasting; join me?"

Don Felipe Cosala never had the—I nearly said heart, but meant—*stomach* to refuse one of Montezuma's breakfasts or dinners, and he sunk the object of his visit for the present, and devoted himself to the enjoyment of the luxuries of that unsurpassed *dejeuner*.

"Senor Montezuma," said Don Felipe, after his breakfast was fully disposed of: "senor, do you know I have often desired to measure my strength against yours?"

"Indeed! Nothing easier, Don Felipe. In what way shall it be?" and Montezuma smiled charmingly.

"Suppose we try swords, senor?"

Montezuma bowed, and led the way to the pistol-gallery.

"Here, Don Felipe, take your choice," and he pointed to the different weapons hung up in cases—weapons of all kinds and nationalities.

The Don selected rapiers, and throwing aside their coats, the two gentlemen faced each other and their blades crossed.

Instantly Don Felipe found himself disarmed; but again and again he resumed his rapier, to meet with the same result.

"You are a marvelous swordsman, Senor Montezuma," said the Don, more hurt at his discomfiture than he cared to show.

"I practice each day and night, Don Felipe, with every weapon here; then I have a strong arm and quick eye," was the quiet explanation.

"Now, Senor Montezuma, suppose we try pistols? I am considered a dead-shot."

Mezrak opened the pistol-cases, and loaded the weapons.

Then a target at five paces was set up—the "bull's-eye" the size of a gold eagle.

Don Felipe fired the six pistols lying before him, one after the other.

The bull's-eye was centered once, and hit three other times, while the other two shots were fired just out of it, yet not the sixteenth of an inch away.

Don Felipe smiled, and Montezuma handed to Mezrak a piece of pasteboard, six inches square, and with a circle, the size of the target bull's-eye, upon it.

This Mezrak placed ten paces distant, and Montezuma fired twelve times, as rapidly as he could pick up the pistols, first with the right hand, then with the left.

The result was marvelous—the bullets had cut the ring away all round, and did not swerve the sixteenth part of an inch from the center.

"Curse him! it will never do to pick a quarrel with him! I have but one course to pursue—make known my suspicions to—but, Great God! it cannot be!"

Such were the thoughts that flashed through the mind of Don Cosala; but he said pleasantly:

"I yield the palm, senor; you are the most wonderful swordsman and shot I ever saw."

"Had I used the pistol with which I killed Monsieur Alden, I could have made the circle line less ragged; those pistols are truer; but I keep them for affairs of the kind such as you aided your friends in."

"It is wonderful; but, by the way, Senor Montezuma, did you see that account of the revenge of a mutineer upon Facon, the ex-Governor-General of Cuba?"

"Yes, I read it two days ago; it was a debt of long standing paid with interest."

Don Felipe Cosala looked straight into the face of Montezuma, but not a muscle quivered.

"Senor Montezuma, as I once said, the evening of your ball, I knew that mutineer well—his name was Merle, and you look strangely like him."

"Indeed! I never was told before that I resembled any one else; but come, Don Felipe, I will give you another treat. I remember you said, on that same occasion, that you were wont, in your younger years, to play an excellent game of cards, and I beg that you try a game with me, for I pride myself upon my luck with the treacherous pasteboards."

"Shall it be for gold, senor?" and Don Felipe's eyes sparkled; here he was king!

"For any sum you may be pleased to name."

"Ah! your income dwarfs mine, senor, so I will have to leave the stake to you, begging you not to go too high."

"Will you play for any stake I name which it is in your power to meet?"

"I will, Senor Montezuma."

"You pledge yourself to this, Don Felipe?"

Don Felipe Cosala was no coward, yet his voice quivered as he answered:

"I pledge myself, Senor Montezuma, to play for any stake you name, if in my power to do so."

"Enough; let us have the game in my own room."

"Montezuma led the way, Don Felipe following, and Valik was summoned to bring refreshments, and place a table with cards on it before them."

The two men then seated themselves, Montezuma wearing that almost habitual and inscrutable smile upon his lips, while his eyes were shaded in melancholy.

"Don Felipe, to give you something worth playing for, besides the principal stake of our game, I will let you hear what I say to my slave, Valik!"

Valik approached and bowed low.

"Valik, watch this game of cards, and if I lose, take from my safe a million of dollars, in best bank-notes, and hand them to Don Felipe Cosala; nay, place them here now."

Valik quickly obeyed the order, and Don Felipe was almost dumb with amazement.

"If I lose, Don Felipe, that sum is yours," said Montezuma.

"If you win, senor?" asked the Don, in surprise.

"Valik, hand me that gold goblet."

The slave obeyed, and the beautiful vessel was placed on the table in front of Montezuma.

"Now hand me one of these green powders in my medicine-case."

Valik promptly did as he was told, and Montezuma took the powder, done up in gold foil, and emptied it into the goblet; then he poured the gold vessel full of a delicious wine, Don Felipe Cosala watching him the while with eyes that were losing their polite droop, and taking up almost a stare.

"Now, Don Felipe, this game of cards is going to end your life or mine."

Don Cosala half sprung to his feet, his hand thrust in his bosom. "What do you mean, sirrah?" he cried in a voice that had a metallic ring.

"Keep cool, my dear Don, and just glance around you," was the quiet reply.

Don Felipe Cosala did as directed, and he sunk back in his chair, his face livid, while from his lips broke one word:

"Entrapped!"

The sight he saw was enough to make him tremble—a half-dozen rifles covered his heart—a half-dozen Persian slaves held them to their shoulders.

"Don Felipe, if you win this game, I pledge you my word you shall go free from this mansion, with the money that lies before you, after first seeing me drink to the dregs this goblet of poison."

"It will kill me in just ten minutes after I have swallowed it."

"You see I place my life, valuable as it is, against yours?"

"Yes," came from the white lips.

"If you lose this game, you shall drink that goblet of poison."

"You have pledged yourself to play for the stakes I offer. I have named them; shuffle the cards, and deal."

The cards were shuffled and each one took up his "hand."

Then the game commenced—Valik and Mezrak looking on, with stolid indifference apparently, and the armed Persians, their rifles still ready, confronting Don Felipe.

Between the white teeth of Montezuma was a cigar; but ever and anon, when the smoke floated away, Don Felipe caught sight of those liquid-diamond eyes fixed upon him, and the smile upon the mouth.

Each man played with the greatest caution.

Presently Don Felipe began to breathe hard; he dare not throw down the last card he held in his hand—the card that must decide the game.

"I am waiting, Don Felipe; it is your play."

The words were painfully calm, and Don Felipe, with a reckless laugh, tossed the card upon the table.

Montezuma had won the game.

As pale as a corpse Don Felipe Cosala attempted to rise, but the rifles confronted him.

"I have won, Don Felipe! It was an interesting game; I never enjoyed one more."

"Keep your seat, senor; the goblet holds an easier death than do those rifles."

Don Felipe Cosala sunk back in his chair, and stretched forth his hand for the gold goblet.

Without a tremor he raised it from the table, and carried it to his lips.

"Is it disagreeable to take, senor?"

"Only in its result, my dear Don; on the contrary, it is delicious to the taste—try it!"

Don Felipe Cosala had made up his mind to face the alternative, and he would do it with steady nerve—with calm face and fearless eye.

Montezuma sat motionless as a statue.

"Don Felipe, life is dearer to you every instant you hesitate."

"By Heaven! you speak the truth. I would drink your health, senor, in this draught of Death."

Montezuma made a motion, and Valik poured him out a goblet of Persian wine.

"Your good health, Senor Montezuma."

"Bon voyage, Don Felipe Cosala—to—Hades," was the cool response.

With a reckless laugh Don Felipe Cosala swallowed the draught, and Montezuma drained his goblet of wine.

"Don Felipe, have you any message for your wife?" asked Montezuma, quietly.

"None!"

"Have you any last commission you would have attended to, Don Felipe?"

"None! I have always lived prepared to die—with nothing left undone."

"Don Felipe Cosala, you are a brave man."

"Thank you, senor; I appreciate the compliment, from the lips of Merle, the Mutineer."

"You know me, then, Don Felipe?" and Montezuma's face never changed.

"I do. How you escaped, the devil only knows; but you shall not escape me now."

As Don Felipe Cosala spoke he dragged his hand from his bosom, thrust it forward, and fired straight at the heart of Montezuma.

"Gracias, senor!" and Montezuma tossed the flattened bullet upon the table.

"Foiled in my dying hour!"

"Yes, Don Felipe; I wear a shirt of mail to protect me against just such attacks," was Montezuma's reply.

But Don Felipe Cosala heard not the words; his head had fallen back upon the silken chair.

Don Felipe Cosala had died by his own hand.

The next morning he was found by his servants, dead upon his own door-step, and the Senora Victorina was a second time a widow.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AFTER MANY LONG YEARS.

THE day following the death of Don Felipe Cosala, which was set down by the wisacres to have been caused by fast living, his body was borne to the grave, and Montezuma, as a countryman of the deceased Mexican, was deputed the honor of bearing on his arm the disconsolate widow, a sympathetic duty which he rendered with the courtly grace for which he was distinguished.

Having escorted the lovely widow back to her home, and placed the settlement of her affairs in the hands of Andrea Angelos—until her beauty and riches won her another husband—Montezuma ordered his coachman to take a turn in the outskirts of the city, and laid himself back upon the silken cushions to enjoy the drive to his heart's content.

What caused it none knew, unless the hand of Fate held the reins, but the horses suddenly dashed away at full speed, wholly unmanageable, and the magnificent carriage was whirled against a passing wagon with a violence that crushed it into pieces.

From the debris Montezuma, whom no fate had heretofore conquered, was taken out senseless, and borne into the parlor of a pretty little cottage near by, while the coachman was killed outright.

When Montezuma's glorious eyes opened to consciousness, some moments after the occurrence, they encountered a face hanging above his own—a face ofondrous beauty, now tear-stained and blanched—the face of Mildred Sebastian!

"Mildred!"

The name broke from between the white teeth with an effort.

"Merle!"

The name fell from her lips as soft as velvet.

"You know me then, Mildred?"

"I knew you when my eyes fell on you at the carnival ball, and an impulse I could not resist made me follow you on horseback to witness your duel with Lucien Bethune and Otis Alden."

"Ha! you were the fair equestrienne, then, Mildred?" and Montezuma gazed upon her with a strange look in his eyes.

Presently he spoke again, and in deep, earnest tones:

"Mildred, I have just awakened from a dream of eighteen long years—nay, not a dream, but a hideous nightmare."

"I awake now at last in your presence, and find you false!"

"Merle, I am not false to you; I deemed you in your grave, or—"

"Go on, Mildred; I am listening."

"You are ill, Merle, and must not talk," she said, as though to change the subject.

"I am not ill, and I must talk. I was merely stunned by the shock, and it is over now," and the man arose to his feet and confronted the woman; then he again asked:

"Or what, Mildred?"

"Or worse!"

"What mean you by that? After receiving my letters telling you all that had happened—all that I had suffered?"

"Merle, I never received the papers you sent—never! so help me God!"

He silently glanced at the solitaire ring on her finger; she understood.

"The gems I received long after they were sent—the letter and papers never reached me."

He saw in her face that she told the truth, and asked:

"Why did you not make this known to me, Mildred?"

"I was a wife," was the haughty reply.

"Mildred, I will hear your story," he said, calmly, and from her lips he heard all.

Then, in his deep, earnest tones, Merle told her of himself—from his sailing in the Sea Serpent, to his coming as Montezuma the Mexican.

"Merle, you have cruelly avenged yourself—ay, and your father," she said, for he had laid his every act bare before her eyes.

"Do you condemn me, Mildred, after all I suffered—after the hell I endured for all those long years?" and he bent upon her a look of fascination that could but bring one reply:

"I do not condemn you, Merle."

A moment's silence fell between them, and then the man said:

"Mildred, this night I sail from this land forever. Will you go with me as my wife, wherever I may go?"

She hesitated, and he said, almost savagely:

"What care you that he has not yet grown cold in his deep sea grave?"

"Shall he rise from the blue waters, to hold you and I longer apart, Mildred?"

"No; where you go, I will go, Merle, and thy people shall be my people—thy creed, my creed, thy God, my God. Can I say more, Merle?"

"It is enough. At sunset I shall call to bear you away forever."

The following morning this piece of news appeared in the leading paper, and astounded the good people of New Orleans:

"MONTEZUMA!"

"The name that heads our column has long been upon every tongue in our city, and a regret will come to every one of our citizens to know that we have lost the mighty Diamond Don from our midst."

"A small fleet, of three vessels, stood down the river last night, leaving the city at midnight, and bound for the sunny land of Mexico."

"The fleet consisted of a yacht, the Nemesis, the full-rigged ship, Launcelot, and the barque, Zulah, all under the command of Montezuma the Mexican, who has thus left our city as suddenly as he appeared in it, and as unexpectedly."

"But ere he departed we learn that he was guilty of some of those remarkable generosity that distinguish him, having presented his city palace, and his sea-side chateau, to our estimable fellow-citizen, Mr. Andrea Angelos, who, it will be remembered, was the banker of the Senor Montezuma while here."

"Nor was this all, for another of our estimable citizens, Captain Louis Chandeaur, fell heir to the Grenville estate on the Gulf shore, and which was purchased by the Senor Montezuma after the terrible tragedy enacted there last summer, and perpetrated by one, Ellis Monette, but, supposed to be, none other than the unfortunate Captain Launcelot Grenville, who was so nearly hung for the alleged murder of his brother, Captain Arthur Grenville, so long a respected resident of New Orleans, and who, we are credibly informed, has given up his home here, having sold it to the Senor Montezuma, and gone with that gentleman in his yacht."

"Nor is this all, for another deserving gentleman, Captain Roy Ralston, commanding, for many years, packet-ships between our city and Vera Cruz, was presented by the indomitable Montezuma with the Grenville mansion above referred to, and it is the captain's intention to give up the sea and settle down to a life ashore in his new and elegant home."

"Now for the last trump to throw down to our readers—the great Montezuma was married before he left our city."

"And the bride, the ladies ask?"

"Was one who has reigned as belle and beauty since her fourteenth year, and than whom no lovelier woman lives—she that was Mrs. Wilber Sebastian—nee, Mildred Monteith."

"Don't be shocked, lady readers, because she married a short two months after her husband's death, for—she wedded Montezuma."

"At the palace last night, at nine o'clock, were assembled a very select company—Andrea Angelos and family, Captain Arthur Grenville, Captain Louis Chandeaur, Captain Roy Ralston—to witness the marriage of Montezuma, of Mexico, to Mildred Sebastian, of New Orleans, the Abbe Facon officiating."

"After a sumptuous supper, the wedding-party, accompanied by Captain Arthur Grenville, boarded the yacht Nemesis, and the fleet set sail."

"We sincerely regret there were no cards, as they would certainly have been gold ones, and as our subscribers are backward in payments, they would have come in well."

"To Montezuma and his beautiful wife, we say bon voyage over all the sunny lands and blue waters of this life."

Two years after the same paper contained the following notice, which will give my kind readers a clew to the fate of the hero and heroine of my romance:

"MONTEZUMA AGAIN!"

"The Reverend Halleck Herndon arrived in our city yesterday, having been on a missionary tour through Eastern lands, and to him we are indebted for the startling information that Montezuma, of Mexico, whom all of our readers will remember, is now reigning as Prince of Persia, and Mildred, his lovely wife, is Princess, while Captain Arthur Grenville acts in the capacity of Head Vizier."

"Through his mother, Zulah, of Persia, Montezuma inherited the title of prince, and is thus proved not of Mexico, but of Persia."

"We can now understand his princely liberality, and lavish style of living."

"Whatever he be—success to him."

Kind reader, my romance is ended; and, if I have interested you in those who have lived, loved, hated and passed away, in the pages you have read, I am more than content, and, as medium of my pen, bid you adieu!

Excuse omnes.

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